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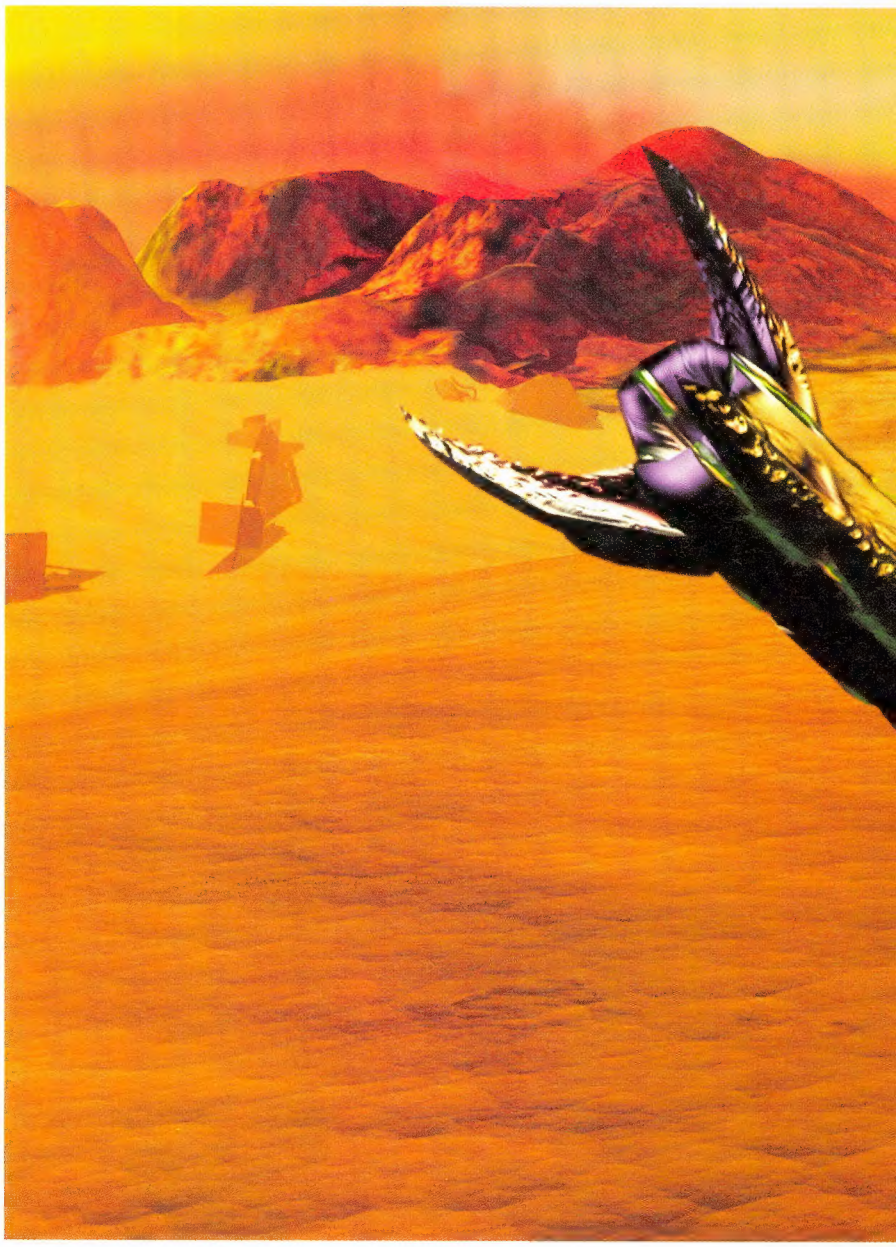

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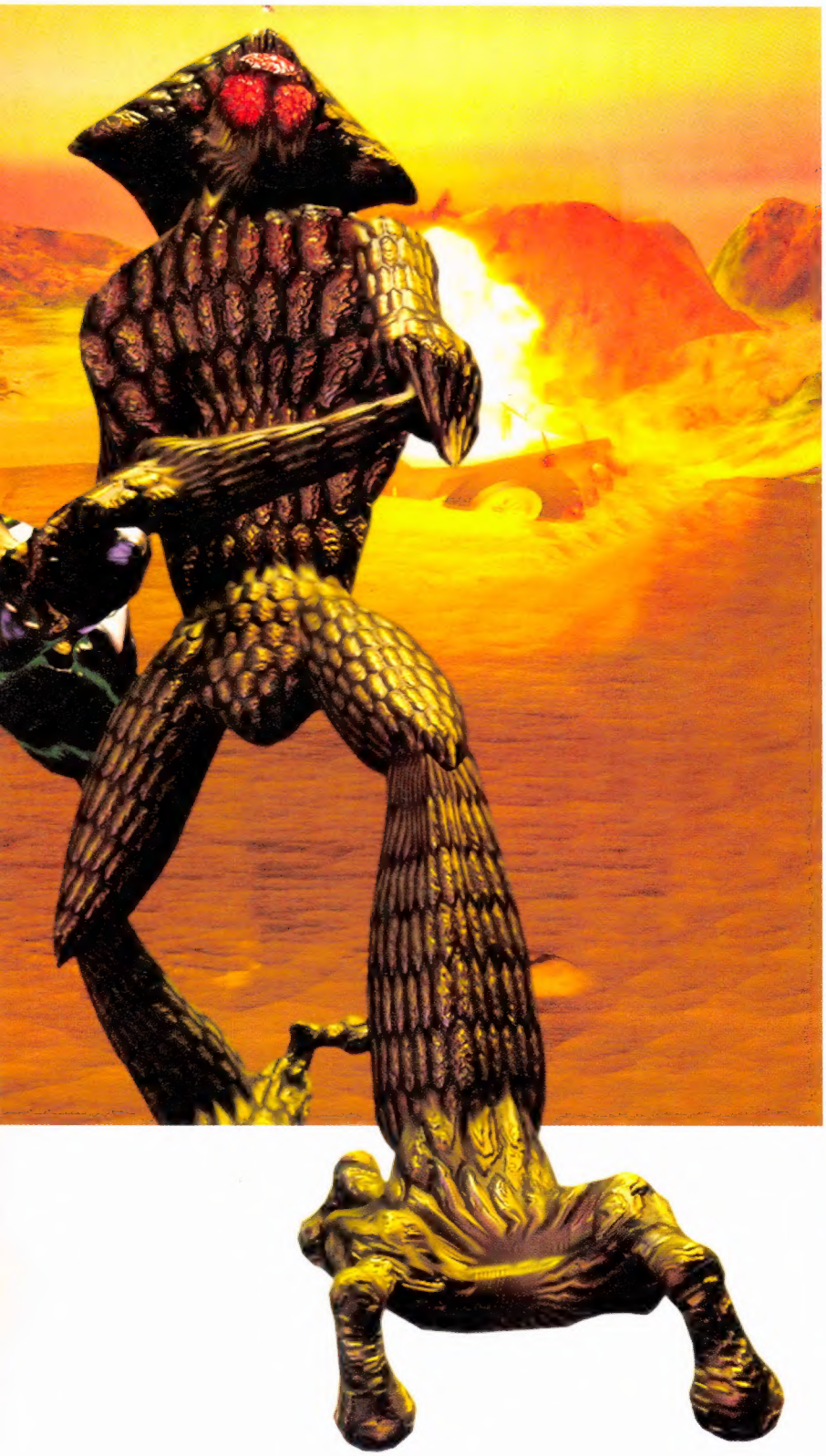

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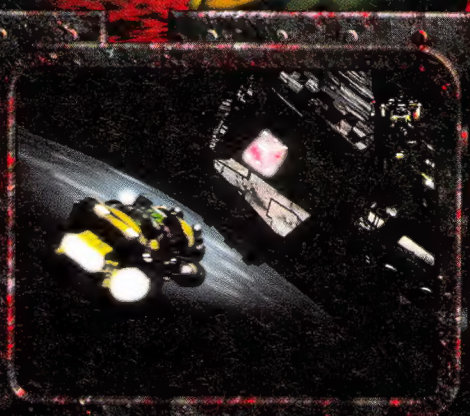

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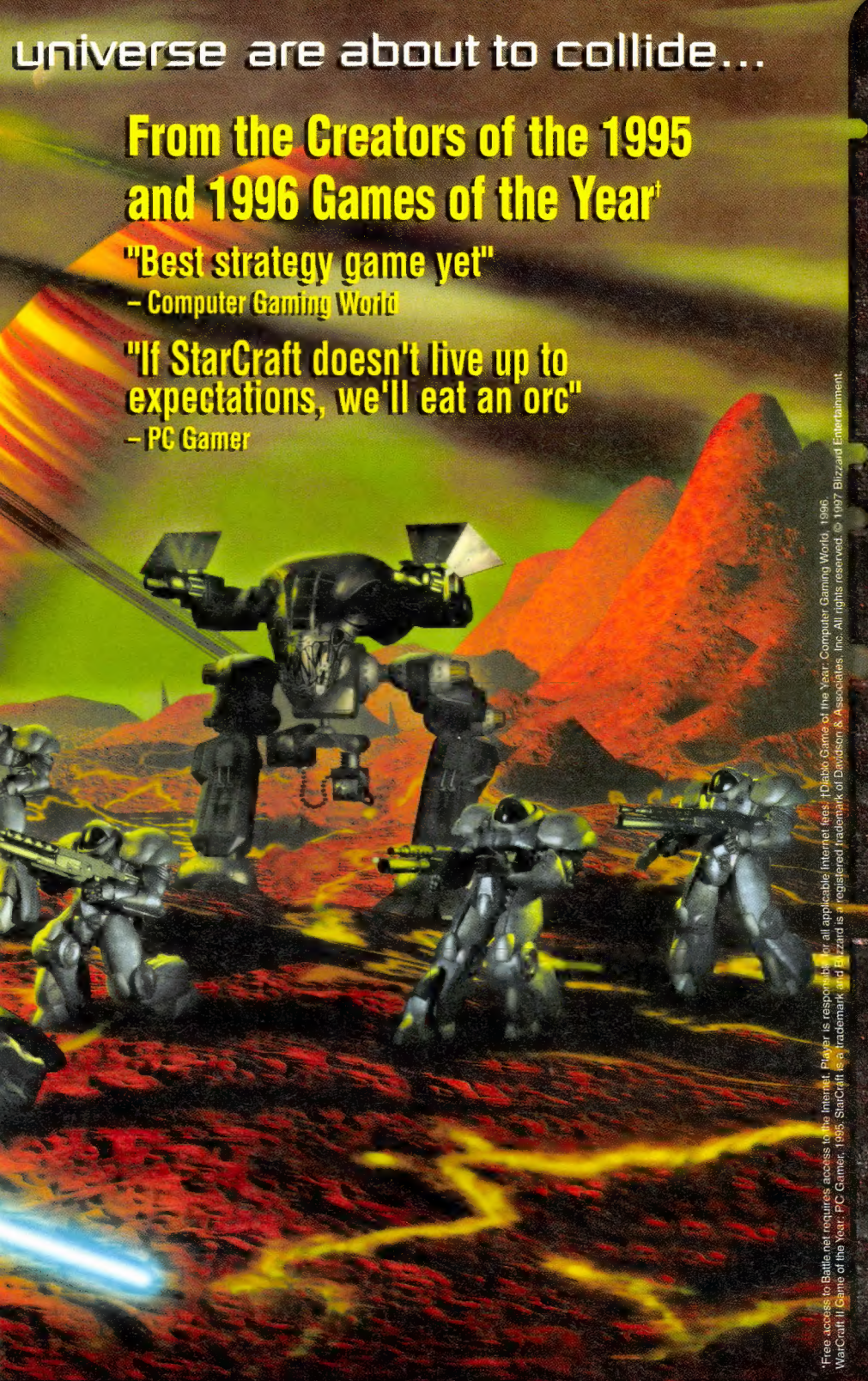

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review ratings

Classic ★★★★★
Excellent ★★★★☆
Good ★★★☆☆
Fair ★★☆☆☆
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While gamers are drowning in a sea of real-time strategy clones, Blue Byte Software is offering a breath of fresh air with a unique new game – *Incubation: Time is Running Out*. It's an exciting and novel treatment of the classic turn-based strategy game that's sure to be a hit, because it's both original and a blast to play.

Incubation is the latest chapter in Blue Byte's successful *Battle Isle* saga. You must lead a squad of marines against the aggressive man-eating Scay'Ger on the planet Scayra. The missions in *Incubation* are quite different from those found in the traditional hex-based games. The battles are not fought in large open fields, but rather in the dark and complex industrial buildings of the colony Scay-Hallwa.

You'll need to rely on your tactical skills rather than strategic planning, as the fast paced action produces constantly changing conditions. For example: during a battle Scay'Ger might start dropping down from the ceiling, jumping out from behind closed doors or even coming up through the floor! In the specially designed multi-player levels, death-matches against up to three other squads can be fought over the Internet, a LAN or via a play-by-mail system.

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The wonderfully detailed 3D environment of *Incubation* is refreshingly different from the rather dull, flat terrain of other strategy games. Using the *Extreme Assault* 3D engine, the events in the game and actions of the characters are all fully animated giving them lifelike appearances and mannerisms.

After experiencing *Incubation's* fascinating gameplay and beautiful 3D graphics, I imagine we will see a mass of *Incubation* clones in a year or so. My advice: *Get the original; it's always better.*

INCUBATION INFORMATION

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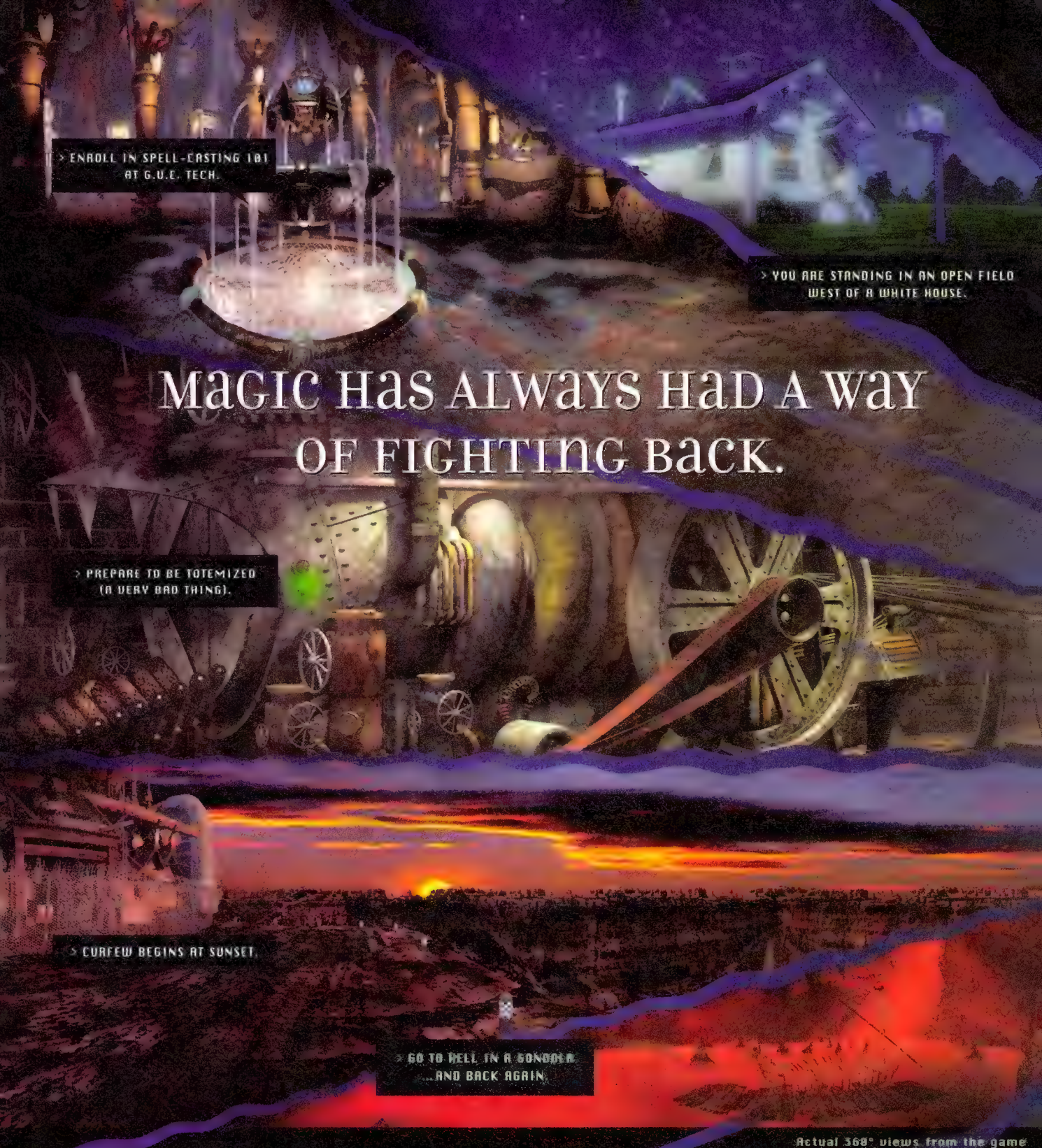
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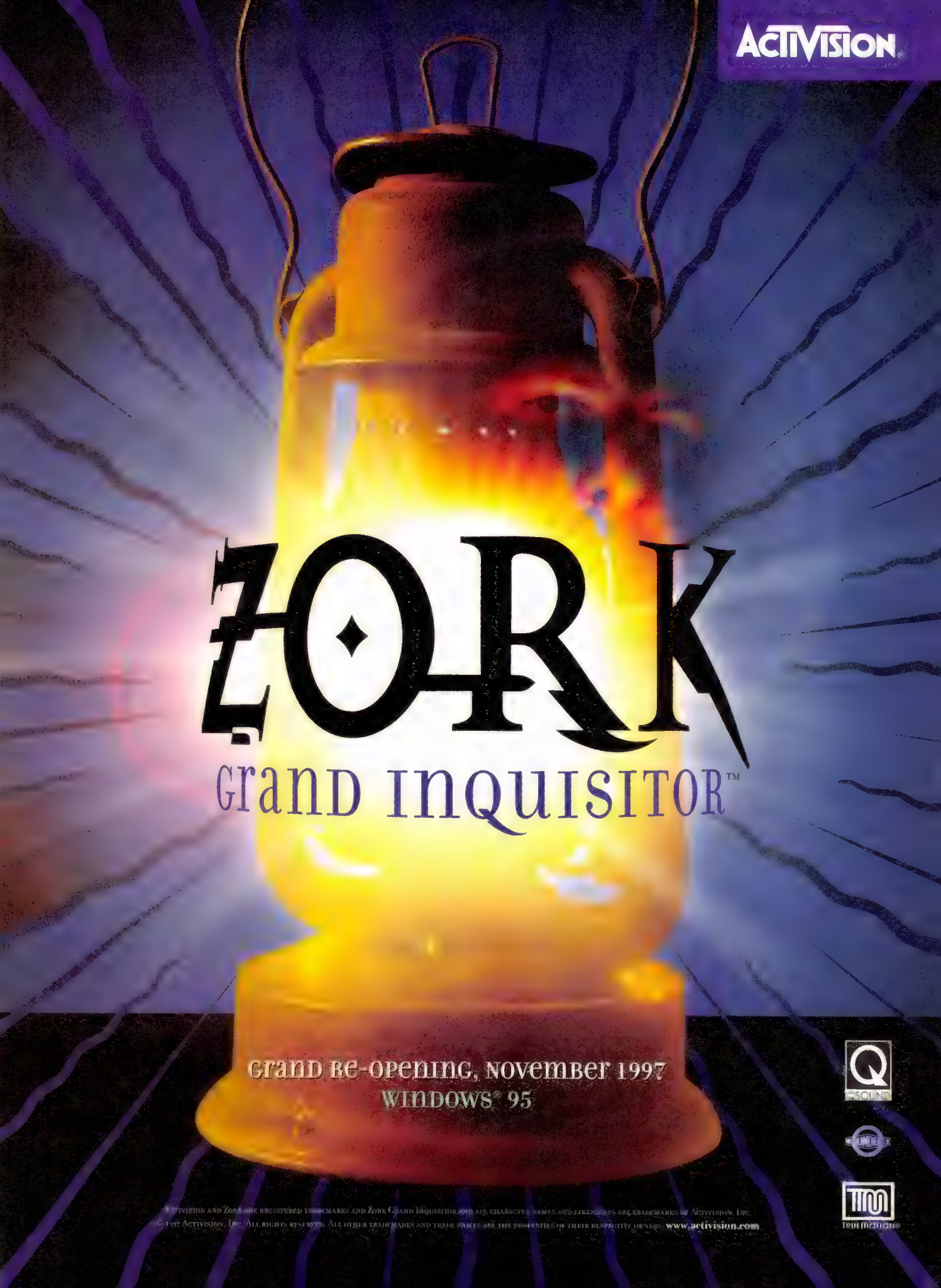

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Games as art

"The first mistake of Art is to assume that it's serious.[1]"

Games are works of art. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "Each work of art excludes the world, concentrates attention on itself. For the time it is the only thing worth doing – to do just that…[2]" Emerson wasn't much of a gamer (though he did enjoy an occasional game of *Doom*), but assuming we can accept the possibility that games are as much a work of art as a film, I'm going to propose a slightly different way of looking at games.

We often get bogged down in the minutiae of software, focusing so much on things like feature sets and realism that we sometimes lose sight of the big picture. In most cases, we're trying to figure out whether or not a game delivers a quality experience, and our definitions of what makes up a "quality" experience may differ greatly. Ultimately, we derive our overall opinion of a game from some combination of elements – from gameplay to graphics – and each element has a different effect on each of us.

One of the elements that tends to cause us to lose our perspective on that big picture is software bugs. To some people, the mere existence of one of these critters is an act of betrayal on the part of the company. How dare they produce a work that doesn't work!

I say throw the bugs in the pot with gameplay, graphics and interface and let them simmer a bit – bugs are merely an element of the gameplay experience. This is not to say they're acceptable, inevitable, or desirable; rather, they're one more thing to consider when evaluating a piece of software, and shouldn't be the only criteria one uses to pass judgment on a game.

My analogy of choice has always been to compare game to film analysis, and detractors gleefully use the same analogy to shoot it down. When evaluating a film, you base your overall experience on how well it manages to combine acting, writing, direction, cinematography, sound, and any number of other elements into a whole. If any one of these elements is weak, it can negatively impact your overall movie experience, and in your mind, it's a weak film.

When evaluating a game, you consider things like gameplay, presentation, interface, and bugs in the same manner. A poorly executed element can negatively impact your overall opinion of the gameplay experience. However, to focus on one element at the exclusion of the others, which many seem to want us to do regarding bugs, is to lose sight of the big picture.

Detractors dismiss this thinking, being of the opinion that software bugs are the equivalent of going to the movie and not being able to see the film because the projector doesn't work. There are obviously degrees of bugginess – software that won't install, for example, cannot be accurately evaluated for its overall experience because you're unable to experience most of it.

However, how is the negative experience different for the gamer who tries to use a feature that crashes a program and the filmgoer who finds a plot hole in a movie that makes the *dénouement* a complete letdown? How dare the filmmaker betray my interest in the story and characters and not carry it through to the end! How dare they produce a film that doesn't work for me, dramatically speaking!

Before anyone sends out a nasty e-mail berating us for this change in review policy, none of these ideas are represented in the magazine. They're merely speculative ramblings designed to generate some dialog into the future of game criticism. We'll continue to try our best to present the information you want in a review, and focus on the minutiae you've come to know and love. And we'll talk about bugs. Lots of bugs. They're not going out of style at any time in the near future. Too bad it's not as easy as it seems to identify a bug, but that's another topic.

– Steve Bauman, Editor

[1] Lester Bangs, *Psychotic Reactions & Carburetor Dung*, "James Taylor Marked for Death," 1987.

[2] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals*, Vol. 8, "A Self On Trial" (1909–14), entry for 22 March 1839.

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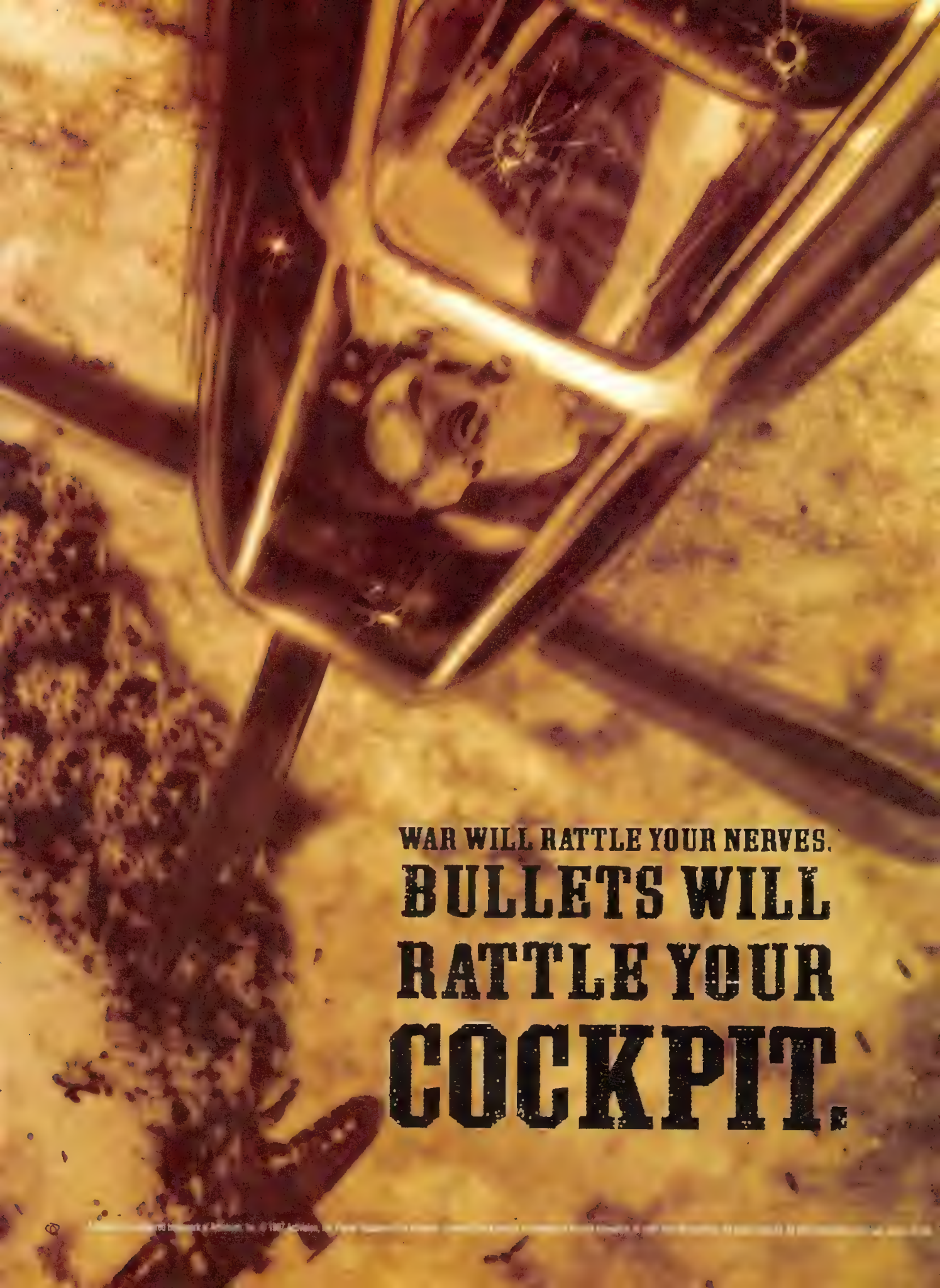
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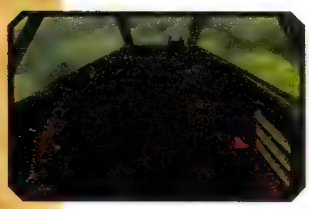
Pilot nine authentically modeled WWII fighters and bombers, including the B-17 Flying Fortress, the Hawker Typhoon and the ME-262 in single or eight-player missions via LAN or Internet. Use in-flight hot-switching to change planes within a squadron during combat, or within a plane, i.e., from pilot or gunner to bombardier.

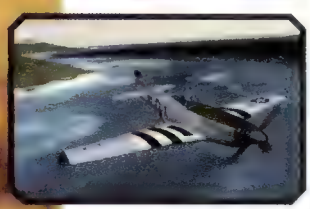


ULTRA-REALISTIC GRAPHICAL DETAIL

Fly over the English Channel, North Africa and German Rhineland in nine highly-detailed virtual 3-D cockpits featuring 360° head rotation and fully functioning instrument panels. Plus, native 3-D card support and software emulation of 3-D hardware features enhance breathtaking hand-built, texture-mapped terrain.

REVOLUTIONARY LIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Take on 30 scenarios (with more than 200 missions) in which every moving object has its own AI, offering unrivaled interaction that's as unpredictable as human opponents. Squadron AI settings include loyalty, aggression, morale, skill and sanity — even individual gunner positions react independently.



UNLIMITED GAMEPLAY

The revolutionary Openplane™ interface allows would-be programmers to create new planes to fly in the game — and others to trade them over the Internet. Use the drag-and-drop Mission Editor to easily create single and multiplayer scenarios with waypoints, targets and win conditions.

ACTUAL IN-GAME SCREENSHOTS

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A fragfest for Generation Q

QuakeCon '97 brings together Quakers from coast-to-coast

This July, in the town of Plano, Texas, just on the outskirts of Dallas, the five-day long QuakeCon '97 commenced in the Ballroom of the local Holiday Inn. Not just any sort of run-of-the-mill convention, QuakeCon is a deathmatch tournament for the absolute diehard *Quake* player out there from not just all around the country, but from all over the world as well. The event, which ran from Wednesday the 16th to Sunday the 20th, offered the chance for *Quakers* to test their mettle in a LAN-based, lag-free environment against their normally Internet-bound companions with the ultimate prize being a really large *Quake* symbol trophy and an Impression Micron Pentium II system.

Since the show was sponsored by id, Ion Storm, Ritual, Rogue (makers of the second *Quake Mission Pack*), Activision and Crack Dot Com (among others), *Quake* fans were given snippets and sneak previews of the new games coming out from the sponsoring companies. Raven had an early version of *Hexen 2* for all to play, and Ion Storm showed a video that gave glimpses of some levels from their upcoming *Daikatana*. Tom Hall showed up at an Ion Storm sponsored evening event in another nearby hotel to answer questions about his *Final Fantasy*-like *Anachronox*, which is in early development.

While members of id and Ion Storm showed up occasionally and were, on the whole, hard to spot (although John Carmack's seminar on *Quake 2* and other things id ran way over time, as expected), Ritual Entertainment's crew mingled with the convention goers and totally wowed the audience with a *Sin* demo that, while still only the result of around three months work, looked impressive. Ritual also holds the claim of bringing the only female model of the show (a stripper from a local Dallas club, actually) to promote *Sin* and represent the game's villainess, Alexis Sinclair. On a side note, several key employees of 3D Realms were seen at the convention sporting cool glow in the dark shirts for their upcoming game, *Prey* (which, it should be noted, is definitely not using the *Quake* engine). As for the main focus of the show – that being competitive deathmatching – Dan "Rix" Hammans, hailing from Ames, Iowa, proved himself to be the most dominant deathmatcher and took home the grand prize. Congratulations, Rix. *–Jason D'Aprile*

The Aftermath at Westwood

Latest Red Alert add-on to address main Counterstrike criticism

WHEN WESTWOOD STUDIOS RELEASED *Red Alert: Counterstrike*, it caused quite an uproar with the fans of multiplayer *Red Alert*. They were extremely angry that the new units in that add-on were not available in multiplayer mode. Westwood has addressed that issue with their second mission disc, *Red Alert: The Aftermath*.

According to Westwood Studios president Brett W. Sperry, "We paid careful attention to our fans' requests for new units in both solo and multiplayer mode, larger and more complex maps, and plenty of new missions." About *Aftermath*, he commented, "It offers so much more game value and depth than we traditionally see in a missions disc."

The Chronosphere Tank in action

The Demolition Truck works its magic

Created by the design teams responsible for both the original *Red Alert* as well as *Counterstrike*, *The Aftermath* features 18 all-new solo missions featuring Allies versus the Soviets. It also includes 100 new maps designed solely for multiplayer. There are a total of seven new units for both multiplayer and solo modes, including the Chronosphere Tank, Demolition Truck, Tesla Tank, Missile Sub, Shock Troopers and the M.A.D. Tank. An additional complement of new units will only be available in the solo game.

Whether *The Aftermath* will make purchasers of *Counterstrike* happy remains to be seen. *The Aftermath* should be out in September. *–Steve Bauman*

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TEEN T AGES 13+ CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

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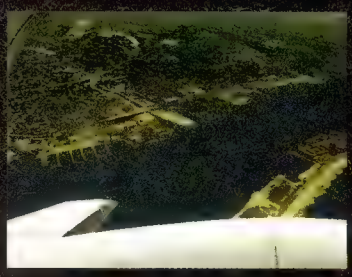
It not only sets a new standard in flight simulation, but goes well beyond anything out there. Introducing Sierra Pro Pilot. Never before has a single flight simulator captured this experience so completely. Here, you'll find the broad strokes and the fine touches. You'll choose from



WE DIDN'T SET OUT TO JUST A SMALL PART OF

a hangar of five civilian aircraft, ranging from the introductory Cessna 172 Skyhawk to the dual-throttled thrill of a Citation Jet. At the other end of the runway are 29 cities and over 3,000 airports, each rendered in exacting detail. All major

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Dynamix

rivers, forests and canyons are afforded such faithful geographic representation they could double as a map. Within 25 nautical miles of any city, the flying world is rendered with lifelike realism. You'll hear from Air Traffic Control and other pilots, and learn to

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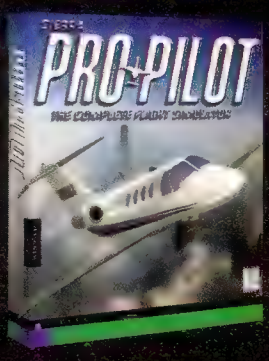
navigate the sky with the close company of other planes. Then, upon touchdown, debrief and compare your performance to over 30 full-motion preparation videos. This is Pro Pilot: The Complete Flight Simulator. Both a statement of what a flight sim should be today, and the promise of what one can be tomorrow.



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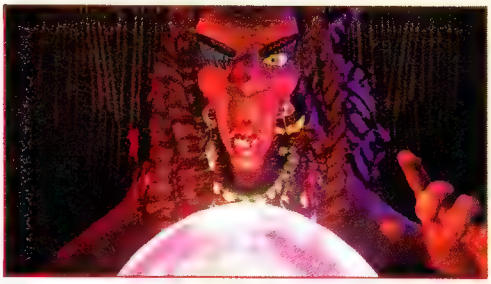
RedJack: Revenge of the Brethren

Rendered pirates drip blood and pieces of eight



The crystal ball that said "The sky is falling!"

FIRST LOOK "AARGH!" SAID THE pirate. "Aargh! Aargh! Aargh!" "Avast, ye matey! Avast, avast, avast!" The Boston Buccaneer Primer has been abandoned recently in the training of a new generation of animated pirates in Cyberflix's latest adventure, *RedJack: Revenge of the Brethren*. Violence, blood, gore and murder on the high seas abound in this not-very-Disney journey into the 1700's.

You will experience the story of Nicholas Dove, a would-be fisherman in an English seaside village who must discover the killer of pirate Redjack, and recover his booty. The game features more than 40 puzzles, fights and adventures, and will provide over 20 animated 3-D characters with whom to interact. Moving away from the *Dust* and *Titanic* days when digitized photographs of actors' heads yielded a "twitch of the bouncing eyebrow" interface, Cyberflix is debuting a fifth generation of DreamFactory, its proprietary engine. The new technology currently offers high resolution 3-D modeled characters with multiple sets of complex movement, and a 360-degree panoramic view that will enable players to zoom in and out of environments.

Not enough jewelry

RedJack was written and designed by Molly Johnson who is happy with the product's versatility. "Whether you're 18, 28 or 65, *RedJack*'s got something for you," she says. Although inspired by Disney, artist Eric Whited has attempted to fulfill producer Bob Clouse's inspiration from 1970's poster art and contemporary Hong Kong "kick flicks." And action style? "Very John Woo," says Clouse. John Woo on the small screen? OK. We'll see your two doubloons and raise you one gold earring. *–Cindy Yans*

RedJack: Revenge of the Brethren • *Cyberflix • Windows 95, Windows NT, MacOS*

BRIEFS: Errata – Our E3 entry [*CGS+ 82*] for Strategy First's ***Man of War*** incorrectly stated that the game was real-time; the game is turn-based, but you can view turn replays in three minute, real-time increments. Also, the game referred to as "Name" in its caption was in fact empire's ***Mig Alley***. It was stated in the review for ***The Ardennes Offensive*** [*CGS+ 82*] that TCP/IP games could not be saved during play. This is not true; automatic game save functionality is included as an integral part of the original program. The ***F/A-18 Hornet 3.0*** tips article last month was truncated; the final sentence should have read "Your mission is over." The author's name, Jim Pedicord, was also cut off… **MicroProse plans updates to Magic** – The

UBIK

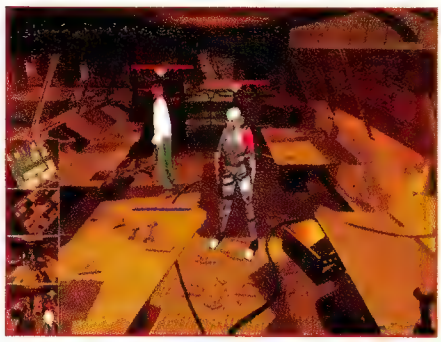
Information at your revolver-tips

FIRST LOOK IT IS 2019. IT IS NEW York. It is an underworld of dark decline and decadence. The commodity? Information. The price? Your life, as you fight to outwit gangs and infiltrators who will stop at nothing – not even the gates of your mind – in their quest to acquire the valuable stuff of which empires are made.

The story of *UBIK* was drawn from a 1969 screenplay created by Philip K. Dick, author of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, the story that served as the basis for *Blade Runner*. The game is a multiplayer action game with RPG elements that takes place in two game universes – Futurist and Pulp. The player is given a mission to execute, and must equip a squad of five espionage exterminators, RPG style, each unit having its own specific powers, arms and abilities.

A comprehensive at-your-fingertips interface

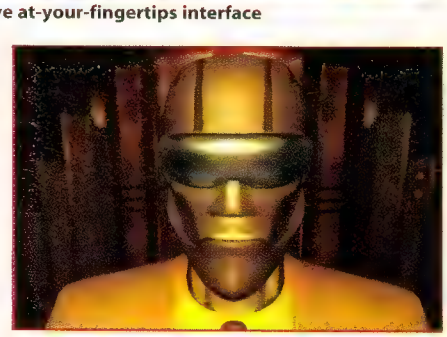
Two camera angles, an overhead view and a zoom, are available to provide for better attack and defense strategy, and a camera icon is available at all times in the interface that will reveal all rooms at all times. An enemy locator map will also help to put your finger on just where they lie.



Air hose or umbilical cord – it's all the same

There are 60 characters available for action over 15 missions with multiplayer capabililty. Animation is real-time 3-D through the use of motion-capture technology on "actual paramilitary figures." Cryo claims the AI gives the enemy characters a memory of each of your squads actions and characteristics, so trouble is always on your heels. But with 30 different weapons and over 50 psychic powers, you're liable to kick trouble right in the teeth. *–Cindy Yans*

UBIK • *Cryo Interactive • Windows 95*

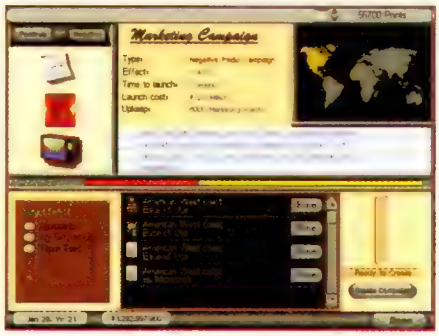


The face that launched Fort Knox

Entrepreneur

Stardock declares war on business

FIRST LOOK JACK TRAMIEL, ONE time head of both Commodore and Atari, reportedly said "business is war." Now, it's doubtful he was the first to say this, or even if he was the first in the computer industry to have said it, but it's obviously a theme that Stardock Systems has hit upon for their upcoming business game, *Entrepreneur*. No, it's not a game about mercenaries hired for combat; instead, it really is a game about business... ruthless, perhaps, but not involving conquering armies. Your goal, instead, is to become the undisputed leader in your market, wiping out all competition.



Design a marketing campaign

Currently Stardock plans to ship the game for a single market (computers) and will release others later on. From your humble beginnings, you have to struggle against up to seven other players (computer or human) as you build your business empire. You can choose to specialize in Marketing, Engineering or Manufacturing, each of which enhances your advantages in a related area. Then, with a few million in seed money, you start out – researching, marketing, coordinating workers, and, hopefully, selling product. As you grow, you push into new market areas while preventing similar moves – if you can – on the part of your opponents.

Your growing business (note: these graphics are preliminary)

While *Entrepreneur* is clearly a game about business, Stardock makes it quite clear that it's not a business *simulation*. Instead of modeling many components of the business world, *Entrepreneur* has a mechanism – which Stardock calls Direct Action Cards (DACs) – through which players will be able to achieve many of the same effects. Cards may allow you, if you have the right kind of control in the right regions, to steal another player's executives, to force standardization in an area (using your products, of course), or to do sneaky, even illegal, actions. According to Stardock, the game will come with hundreds of these cards, and more can be made available after the game ships.

Set somewhere between the absolute simplicity of *Monopoly* and the hard-core business play of *Capitalism*, Stardock hopes that *Entrepreneur* will appeal to fans of both as well as to those looking for something in between those two extremes. Since the game's quite far along already, you should get a chance to judge for yourself soon. *–Scott Udell*

Entrepreneur • *Stardock Systems* • *Windows 95, OS/2*

first two in a planned series of additions to MicroProse's ***Magic: The Gathering*** should be out soon. The first package will add a sealed deck module, over 140 new cards (from the *Arabian Nights*, *Antiquities*, and *Unlimited* sets) and a few interface tweaks. The second package, which should be out by the holidays and will be available for free download, will provide the long-awaited **multiplayer** capability gamers have asked for...

F-22 conflict resolved The F-22 controversy [*CGS+ 81*] seems settled for now. On the naming side of the conflict, Interactive Magic dropped the word "Raptor" from the title of their game, bowing not to the trademark conflict with NovaLogic but to Apogee, who holds a software title

High Heat

A rookie steps up to the plate

FIRST LOOK WHILE TRIP HAWKINS was at Electronic Arts, they released the legendary *Earl Weaver Baseball*, which many consider the best baseball game ever made. Now that he's moved on to 3DO, he's decided the time is right to launch another baseball game – *High Heat*.

As 3DO's first sports game, it's targeting the big players in the industry, namely EA Sports' *Triple Play*, Accolade's *Hardball* and Sierra's *Front Page Sports Baseball*. It will feature 3D polygonal characters and stadiums, motion captured animation (ranging from hitters charging the mound to base runners ramming the catcher), STATS, Inc. statistics (updates will be available for download on a daily basis), and possibly both the MLBPA (for players) and MLB (for teams) licenses.

The 3D graphics look competitive with what's currently on the market

The batter-pitcher interface

Like most baseball games on the market, it's scheduled to include single games, seasons, tournaments and home-run contests. Like the *Front Page Sports* series, it will have a multi-season mode where you can trade with other teams, build up a farm system, and have players improve and age over time.

Most games are judged by their on-field action, and in a conversation with Hawkins, he clearly understands the subtleties of baseball (he's an enormous fan). They're promising realistic base-running, fielding and pitcher management, and particular emphasis is being placed on the most important component of any baseball game, the pitcher-batter confrontation.

High Heat is scheduled for release at the beginning of the 1998 baseball season. *–Steve Bauman*

High Heat Baseball • *3DO* • *Windows 95*

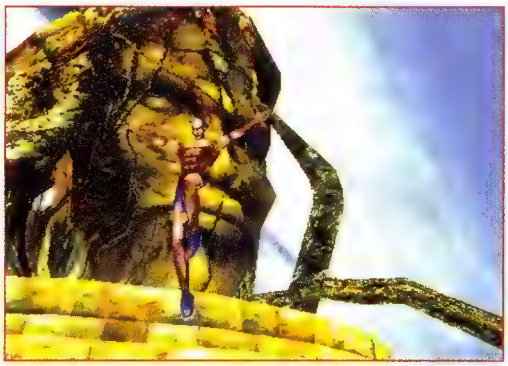
Dreams to Reality

Where sleep is only the beginning

You are in much better shape than Beldar

FIRST LOOK DURING REM SLEEP, when your eyes get all weird and your significant other is taking Polaroids for blackmail material, you travel into another dimension – your dream world, where anything is possible. Cryo Interactive's *Dreams to Reality* brings us a world in which you don't have to be asleep to dream.

Combining action, adventure and strategy, *Dreams* will take players through over 100 indoor and outdoor locations in a vast world, where they will need to gather magical powers and to understand the origin of dreams (without the benefit of Psych 101) in order to save unsuspecting dreamers from an evil gang of subconscious manipulators. You thought overbearing mothers were experts at entering the subconscious? Well now you can join them, since you have strange powers and abilities that allow you to mind surf among other characters, using their own unique strengths to combat evil in the dreamworld.



The annual Ninja cheerleading competition

In a third person 3-D package, you view your character as he walks, runs, jumps, swims, rides, flies, speaks and fights; *and* performs aerial looping, high-speed motorcycle driving, tunnel surfboarding, (kicking himself in the head and running for office?) in complete real-time.

As dreams have layers, so does the game environment, filled with over 100 characters including monsters, super-beings and others to interact with and confront. You will never know who is friend and who is foe from one moment to the next. You will never know what is real and what is imaginary. But hopefully you *will* know that you and your 3Dfx card are awake and running through this dreamlike state of… the art? *–Cindy Yans*

Dreams to Reality • *Cryo Interactive* • *Windows 95*

trademark for their action game, *Raptor*. NovaLogic, however, is still calling their upcoming game *F-22 Raptor*. On the issue of representing the actual plane in games, manufacturer Lockheed-Martin has decided not to pursue exclusive license agreements… **Arsenal changes direction** – Arsenal Publishing has announced that they will no longer be a publisher, choosing instead to focus on development. They are changing their name to **Arsenal Interactive**, and are negotiating with the developers of ***TacOps*** and ***Road to Moscow*** to terminate their publishing agreements with Arsenal. Current in-house development efforts will continue, but no publisher for these titles has been signed yet… ■

Dead Unity

It's all in the Works

FIRST LOOK IN A SCI-FI SUSPENSE thriller, THQ summons players directly to the core. You play Works, an "artificially enhanced human" who must power down the immense computer core of an unfathomable global mediation machine. In an alternate reality, you will face 9-foot tall metal giants called Fleshies, as well as the masterful and diabolical core of the computer itself, in a blowout showdown shoot-em up. (Try Fleshies – the sensible breakfast cereal.)

Works may choose from over 100 weapons and enhancements that he may interchange at the touch of an ARM (Automatic Reconfigurable Munitions). That's over 100 ways to slice, dice, maim, mutilate, impale, mangle and cripple over 30 original enemy characters. Based upon the player's choices, there are multiple story outcomes.

The game utilizes a "unity-engine" for 3-D movement through over 400 rendered scenes including environments such as an underground dam, a robot assembly plant carved out of a mountain and a 250 story skyscraper. It also features dynamically changing environments, such as breaking windows, bullet holes in walls and day to night lighting shifts. Over 40 minutes of original music orchestrate the bloody mayhem and 3-D accelerator cards are supported. So are your warped proclivities toward destruction. *–Cindy Yans*

Dead Unity • *THQ* • *Windows 95*

Running amid the huge orbs

Battling bots dance the watusi

Class picture at the Scrap Metal Academy

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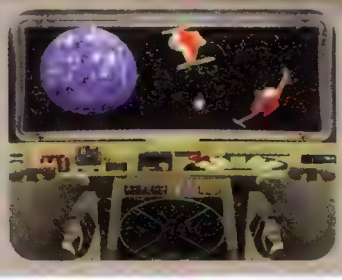
WINDOWS®95 PC CD-ROM



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1. Unscramble the names of the 3 legendary Star Trek instructors featured in Starfleet Academy.

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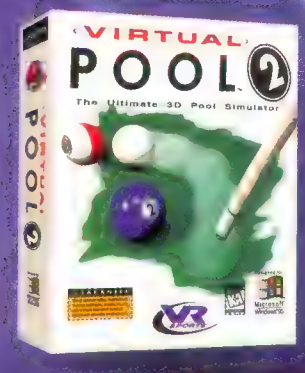

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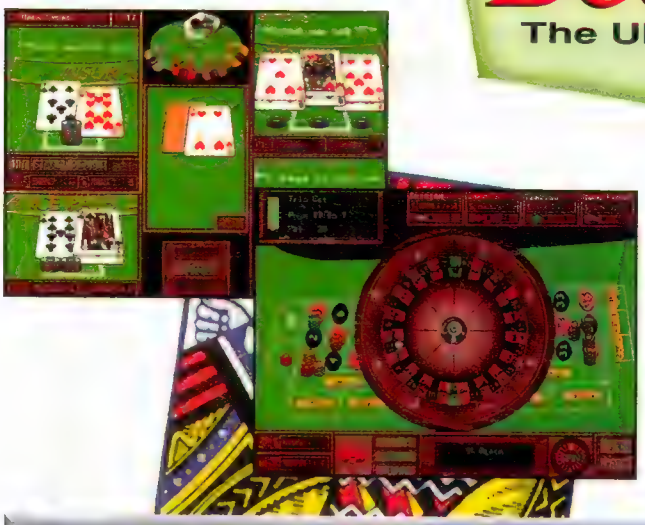

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WINDOWS®95 PC CD-ROM

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Designed for Microsoft Windows 95

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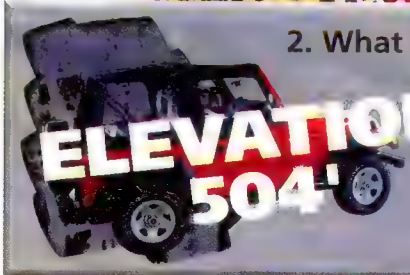

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"The Trailer Park Won't Be The Same"
- Computer Gaming World

Redneck Rampage is a ruckus-raisin' riot of a first-person 3D shooter set in the fictional town of Hickston, Arkansas. Armed with up to ten impractical weapons, players blast their way through country bars, trailer parks, and chicken processing plants in search of their missing pig who's been abducted by evil aliens. But they ain't gonna make it without enough fuel (pork rinds and whiskey) to fend off good ol' boys with sawed-off shotguns who aim to blow away their bony behinds.

PC CD-ROM

"It's A Heck Of A Hayride"
- Gamespot

"The Funniest Game We've Played this Year Y'all"
- Happy Puppy

"One Of The Most Hysterical Games In Years"
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XATRIX entertainment

Keep Yer Eyes Open For Official Redneck Rampage Levels

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3. Complete the Redneck Rampage Word Search.

G	B	G	I	P	V	D	I	C	C
T	U	R	D	M	I	N	I	O	N
K	B	N	I	I	X	I	W	O	E
R	B	O	N	Y	E	R	S	T	I
O	A	D	R	A	N	O	E	L	L
P	I	N	E	K	C	I	H	C	A

Gun
Pig
Vixen
Coot
Cow
Turdminion
Bony
Yer
Leonard
Pork
Chicken
Alien
Bubba
Rind

5 letters are unused. 4 are the letter I. What's the 5th?

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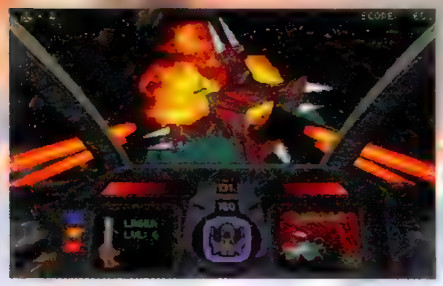
Some race for glory. Some for money. Then there are those who drive for the sheer ecstasy of crunching bones against their bumper. Introducing **Carmageddon**, the racing game that separates the men from the grease spots on the road. Pit your wits and wheels against 25 maniac drivers over 36 formidable race circuits to become The King of Carnage and The Prince of Pile-up. **PC CD-ROM**

SCi MATURE M ESRB



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Microsoft Windows 95 TEEN T AGES 13+ CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Descent II Developed by Parallax Software

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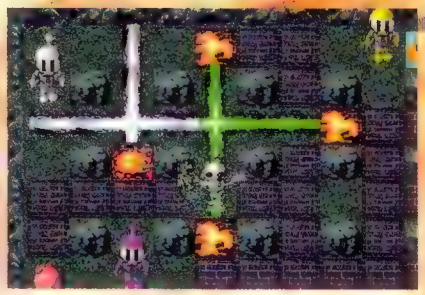

HUDSON®

COMPATIBLE Windows 95 COMPATIBLE

KA CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

4. It's an addictive action/arcade game, where you race against the clock to blow your opponents to smithereens.

4 5 1 15 13

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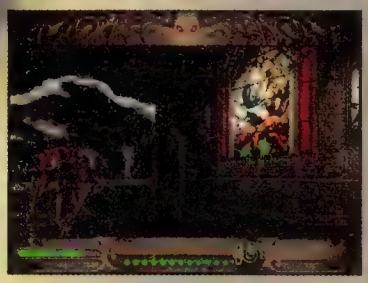
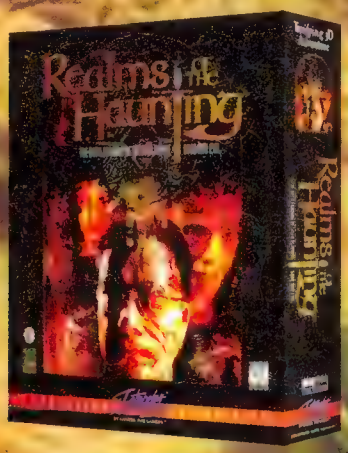


One by one, the Seals of protection have been broken. Step by step, Darkness prepares for its final assault. And as the apocalypse draws near, only one force can stop the shadow of evil from eternal reign...you.



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...offers one of the most fluid, absorbing fantasy-horror game experiences available."

★★★★½ *CGW*

"ROTH covers all the bases."

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Gremlin

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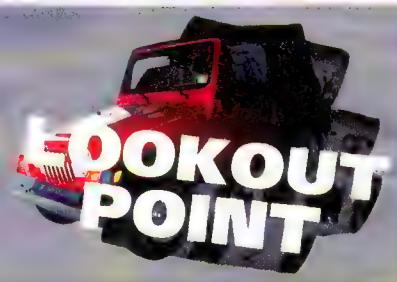

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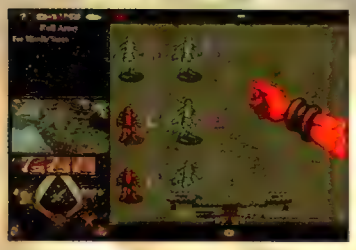

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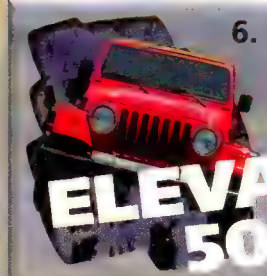
FORGOTTEN REALMS
Dungeons & Dragons



6. It's 12 of the greatest role playing fantasy adventures ever, gathered in one boxed set.

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Fallout

A POST NUCLEAR ROLE PLAYING GAME

"Fallout has everything necessary to be the best roleplaying game of all time"

- Next Generation

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- Over 50 mini-quests with multiple solutions take you through devastated wastelands such as Rad Scorpion dens, Junktown, and the Brotherhood of Steel.
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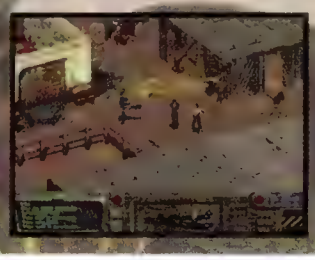
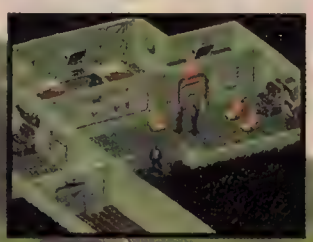
- Available on WIN®95/DOS and Mac CD-ROM.





Interplay
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7. Fallout is a post-nuclear role playing game with over 50 mini-quests where you can target specific body parts to:

__ __ __ __ __, __ __ __ __ __ __ __,

or __ __ __ __, as __ __ __ __ __ __ __ __ __.

2 9

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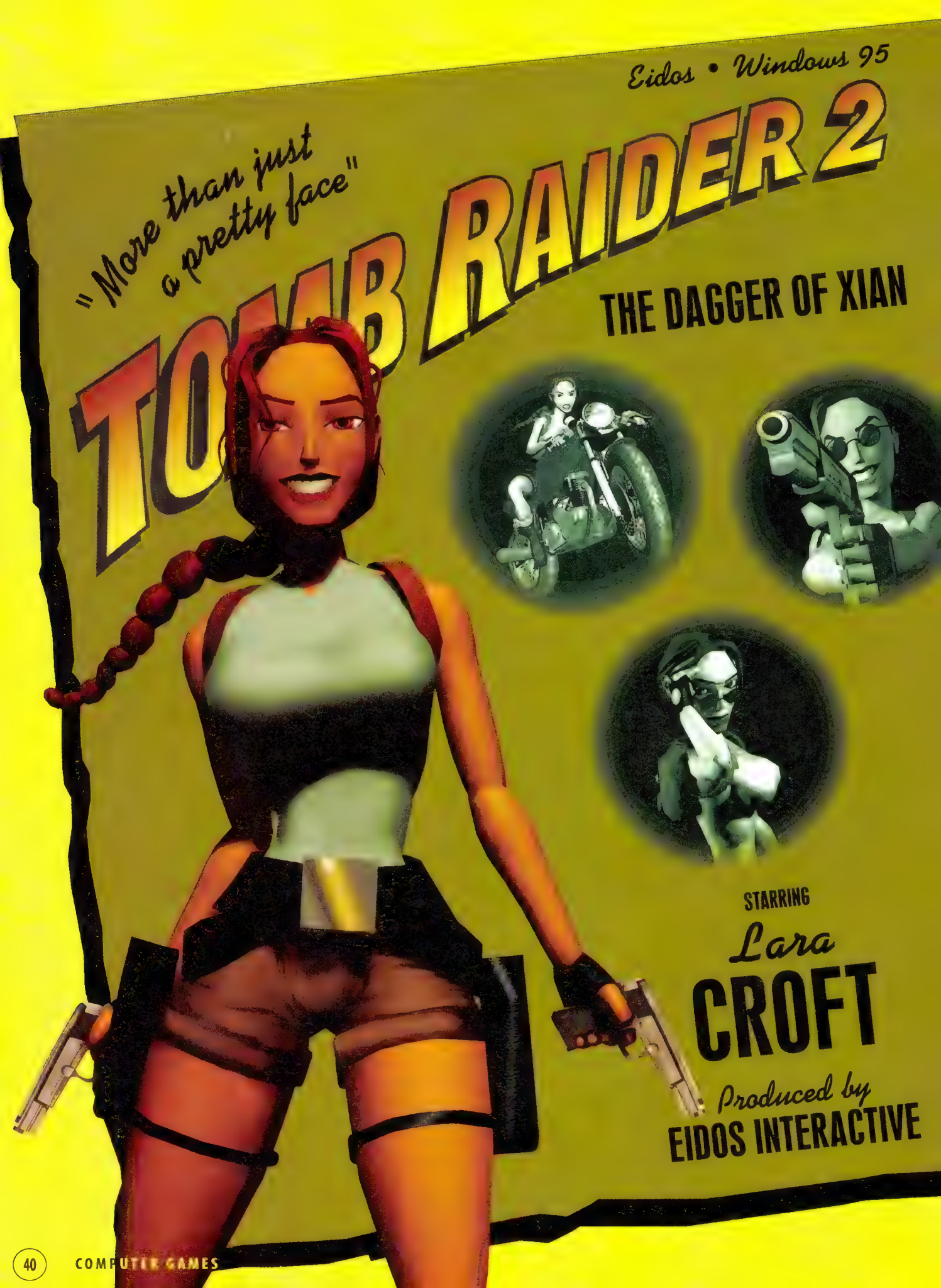

Eidos • Windows 95
"More than just a pretty face"
TOMB RAIDER 2
THE DAGGER OF XIAN
STARRING
Lara
CROFT
Produced by
EIDOS INTERACTIVE

The Dagger of Xian is an ancient Chinese artifact that was rumored to have once been used by an unnamed tyrannical emperor before being seized by Tibetan warrior monks. It eventually made its way to a resting place within the Great Wall of China. Why the interest in such an artifact? Legend has it that he who plunges the dagger deep into his heart will gain the power of the dragon…

Enter one Lara Croft, adventurer, archeologist, socialite, fashion model. She wants the Dagger of Xian, and so does Marco Bartoli, the son of the magician Gianni Bartoli, who is rumored to have a "device" that will open the tomb where the Dagger is located. As both parties go searching the world over for the pieces to the puzzle that will open the door of the tomb, they're constantly hounded by the Dagger's protector, a Chinese and Italian group called the Fiama, who will do anything in its power to keep anyone from finding the Dagger.

Such is the story of *Tomb Raider 2: The Dagger of Xian*, Eidos Interactive's sequel to the award-winning *Tomb Raider* (voted "Game of the Year" by this publication). Lara's travels will take her from outdoor locations in Venice, China and Tibet, to sunken ships, catacombs and deadly swamps. If the plot sounds borrowed *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, well, that's part of the charm.

Like the original, *Tomb Raider 2* is a third-person action/adventure that uses true 3D environments *a la Quake*, but the emphasis in the game is more on exploration and discovery than bloodshed. As such, it has more in common with platform games like *Prince of Persia* than *Doom*, which is what made the original such a refreshing change of pace.

THE NEW STUFF

Enhancements to the 3D engine include support for Direct3D (in fact, the playable version used for this article already has it enabled) and enhanced dynamic lighting. Examples of the latter are already present in the incomplete levels. For example, while exploring a sunken-ship, you'll need flares to see some of the darker regions, and on a level set in the mountains of Tibet, you can enter a dark room and throw a flare on the ground, illuminating some previously unseen traps.

The levels are said to be larger than before (which is saying something), and feature more varied environments. While the size is nearly impossible to gauge (we'll take their word on it), the three levels included in the version used for this article are definitely varied, moving from an outdoor level in Venice, Italy to a small portion of the sunken ship, and the enormous, albeit unfinished, snow and ice-filled Tibetan level (complete with a guest appearance by Mr. Abominable Snowman).

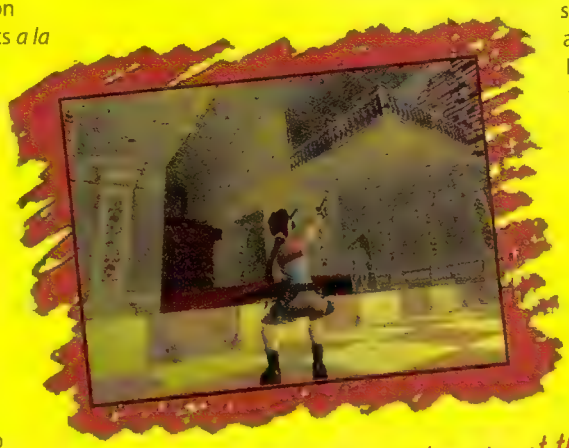
Lara has a few new tricks up her sleeve as well. In addition to the walking, running, jumping, swimming and hanging from walls present in the original game, Lara will add crawling and wall climbing to her repertoire. Control-wise, the keyboard layout is identical, which should eliminate any sort of learning curve for fans of the original game.

There are more human, rather than animal, enemies in this game than in the prequel, and with that comes the expectation of better enemy AI. In a few of the completed rooms, there are some humans that attack, and they do tend to be a bit more unpredictable, running in and out of the rooms and indeed exhibiting more smarts. In particular, one bad guy would attack with a pipe, run away, and as you started after him, turn and attack again.

NO MULTIPLAYER

Depending on your opinion of the first game, Eidos has either played it safe or taken an enormous risk with *Tomb Raider 2*. There were two approaches they could have taken: stay with the focus on single-player exploration and adventure gaming of the original, or try to adapt it to a multiplayer environment, perhaps adding deathmatch or capture-the-flag modes.

The developer of the game, Core Design, has chosen the to go with the former, rather than the latter, which is sure to disappoint the "if it doesn't have multiplayer, I won't buy it" crowd. While multiplayer is usually a welcome addition to any game, and tends to increase its long-term replayability, it wouldn't be as easy as putting some DirectPlay hooks and dumping a bunch of Laras in a room to blast the hell out of each other. But *Tomb Raider 2*, like the original, is about beating an environment, not racking up kills, and multiplayer focus could upset the balance of the game. Besides, we already have *Quake* and its ilk – leave them as the standard bearers for multiplayer 3D gaming. There would be some logistical problems as well, as Lara has quite a bit more animation and a higher polygon-count than your average *Quake*-dude. As such, frame rates would be a problem, and without the personality the animation of the Lara Croft character brings to the game, would it be worth the loss? Finally, the game's auto-aiming could make deathmatch a bit dull, and a third-person perspective without that feature makes aiming a ranged weapon nearly impossible (flashbacks to the original *Alone in the Dark* and its shotgun).



▲ *Lara takes aim at the competition*

◀ *Lara Croft 2.0, with her new ponytail*

▼ *Only partially complete, the Tibet level is already visually impressive*

"The first time an engine moves this fast and is just as detailed at 100 feet as 100,000 feet."
PC Gamer
Don't take our word for it.
See for yourself at www.eidosinteractive.com

LOOK!
NO PIXELS.
Actual gameplay
JSF
EIDOS
INTERACTIVE
You've been warned.

THE LARA FILES

Some of the success of *Tomb Raider* has to be attributed to the considerable charms of its star, Ms. Lara Croft. She's become a full-blown celebrity, appearing on the cover of a non-computer publication, England's *The Face*, and in digital form as a backdrop in U2's PopMart tour. She's entered the realm of such pop-culture videogame icons as Mario, Sonic the Hedgehog and the PC's only identifiable personality, Duke Nukem.

Tomb Raider 2 will enhance the aspects of her character that made her so identifiable. No, she hasn't had a(nother) breast augmentation, but has the new moves mentioned previously, new outfits (a bomber jacket and wet-suit), new weapons (including an underwater harpoon gun) and a higher polygon-count on-screen representation, complete with a ponytail that bounces behind her as she runs (fortunately, other things don't bounce as she runs, otherwise she'd definitely lose an eye).

THE FINAL WORD

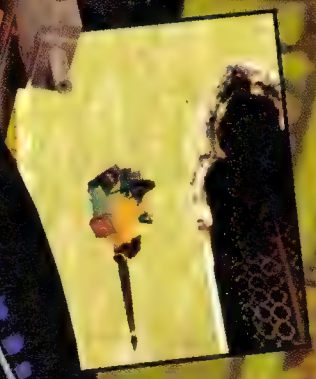
While you could definitely accuse Eidos of playing it safe with *Tomb Raider 2*, it's hard to deny that the reasons for doing it are sound. The original game has sold well over two million copies across all platforms (PC, PlayStation and Saturn), and clearly *Tomb Raider 2* is poised to do even better when released in mid-November, especially on the PC (the addition of native 3D accelerator support will no doubt fuel additional interest). Add the possibility of additional levels available for download from the Internet (something the consoles can only dream about), and it indeed looks like a rosy future for Lara.

Rather than using the same engine and putting in some new levels (*a la Doom II*), it appears that Core and Eidos are evolving the gameplay and adding a few new wrinkles. If it's not exactly the revolutionary product the original was, there's nothing wrong with improved technology, gameplay and level design. More importantly, they've not altered the original gameplay formula in order to jump on the multiplayer bandwagon, which is either a good or bad thing depending on your perspective. Along with Shiny's *MDK*, conceding that market to *Quake* and its variants means gamers will have at least one other alternative 3D gaming experience this year. -*Steve Bauman*

The Venice level features many outdoor environments

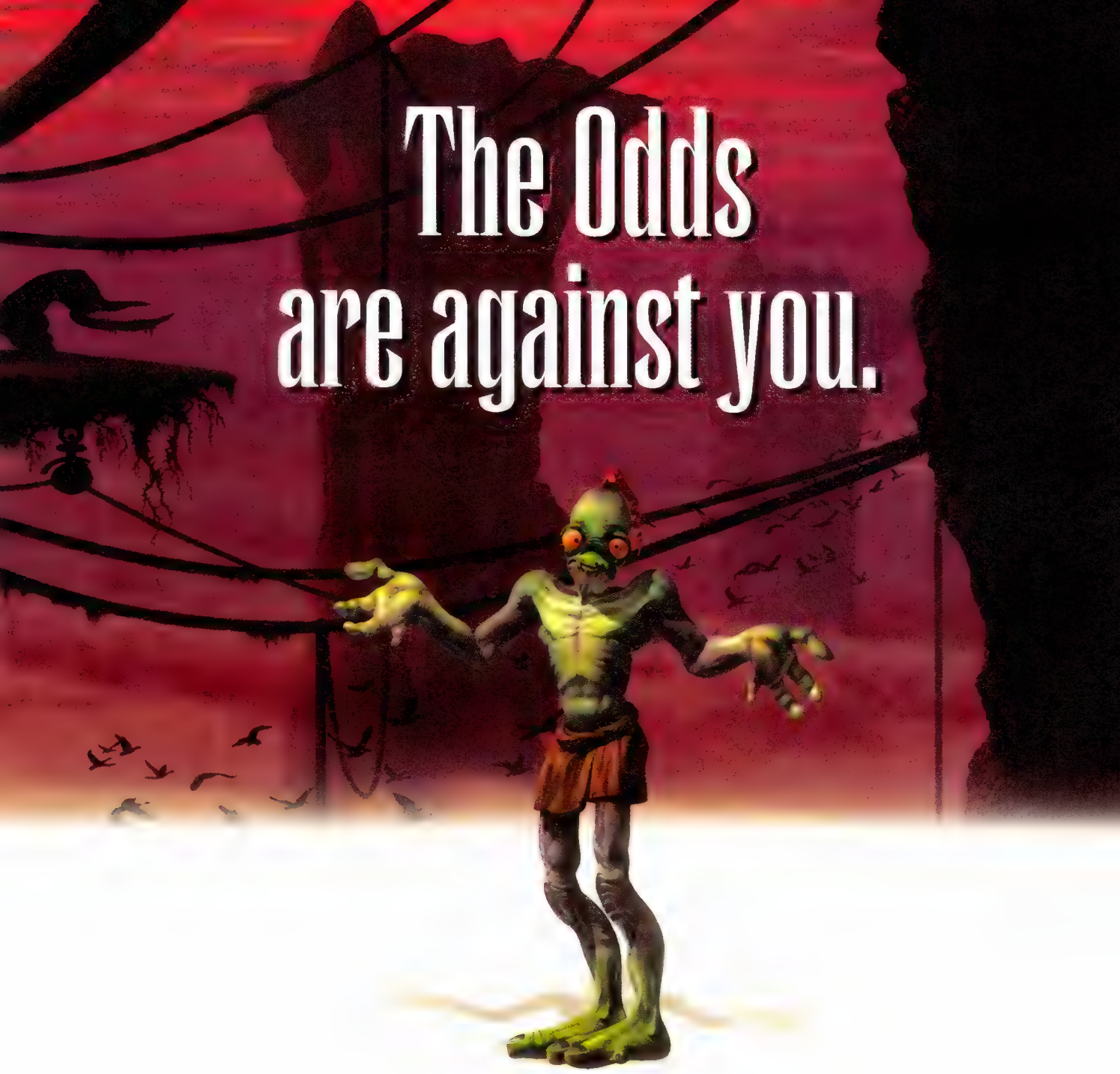
Lara in her new wetsuit

Lara steals some light in the situation



▲ Lara in action

Lara models her new leather bomber jacket



He's skinny. He wears a loincloth. He has no weapons.
(He's the guy that you play.)

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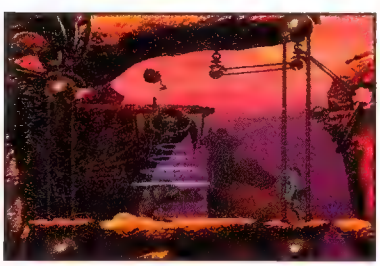
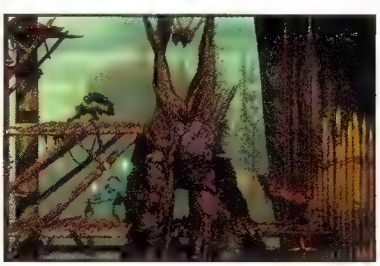


don't get mad: get elum

between a paramite and a hard place



possession is 9/10ths of the law

one-dimensional shooter. Solve wicked situations and wicked enemies. But, not in some wallpaper puzzle game.

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GAMING GETS ODD THIS OCTOBER

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IN 3-D!
3-D!
3-D!

ENGINES OF

Starring

Deathtrap Dungeon
Half-Life
Quake 2
G-Police
Prey
Sin

Deathtrap Dungeon

Half-Life

DESTRUCTION

As Christmas approaches, it's become clear (as if it wasn't before) that 3D gaming is simply *it*. Amidst all the hype and flash, what hasn't been clear is whether the plethora of new 3D games coming at the end of this year and in '98 will actually do anything new or offer anything we haven't seen before. The *Quake* engine is proving itself to be one of the most licensed 3D engines in the industry, Epic's *Unreal* is providing the base for at least three titles, and there are a horde of brand new custom-built engines as well. But do any of them actually do more than let us just go around and shoot stuff? We've been hearing that first person gaming is going to evolve and become more than just mindless shooting and cloning, but when will we finally see any of this innovation?

To start with, most of these 3D engines out now or coming soon were designed with certain things in mind, and with specific limitations as well. For example, games based on the *Quake* engine have a heavy, monolithic look and feel to them; all the structures seem massive and solid. There's little that could be described as "light and airy", and next to nothing in the way of large outdoor or indoor environments. Why? Because *Quake* wasn't designed for the great outdoors, but it was designed for claustrophobia and intense indoor environments, which it does a damn good job at. On the other hand, *Tomb Raider* and Bethesda's XnGine (used in games like *SkyNET*) do wide-open spaces within reason, though close examination reveals that in some of *Tomb Raider*'s larger scenes, lighting is a major factor in this. Fogging distant objects, and a specific range to visible light, greatly smooth out performance in game engines that have to use large environments – at least in the past.

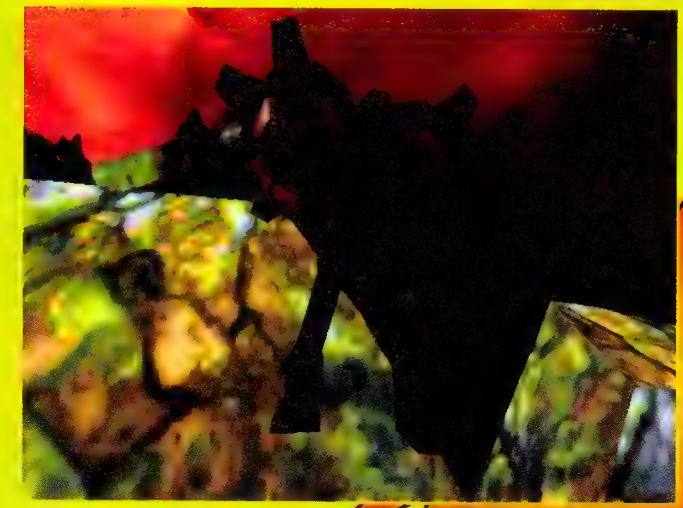
3D ENGINES AND INTERACTIVITY

Since 3D card support is almost a given in new games, simply saying a game looks great is both pointless and possibly redundant. Of course new games look great; given the hardware requirements they'd better. But now that the graphic quality has been taken to the next level, designers can finally focus on the things that make the player feel more a part of the game's world. The Holy Grail of 3D gaming is making the player feel totally immersed in the virtual world, and the best ways to do this is not so much in spectacular graphics but in making the gamer feel like they can affect the world and thereby be affected by it. Interactivity and Artificial Intelligence (AI) are what give this illusion and all the developers seem to realize this. And there's no shortage of upcoming choices for gamers, with six new *Quake*-engine games coming, along with a slew of competing engines due out between now and as far away as the end of next year.

Starting with the sequel to reigning champ of first person shooters, **QUAKE 2** has absolutely nothing to do with the original *Quake*. The game's upgraded engine has units instead of actual levels and each unit is made of several interconnected levels that you can travel back and forth through; also, you'll (finally) be able to perform actions that affect and change these levels. *Quake* 2's level design is structured so you can see different parts of one level affecting another, and players will be able to interact with the world much more. Walls and floors can be blown up at times, true rotation moves the player and new interpolation methods make the character animation much smoother. Developer id Software has rendered a landscape of the planet that the game takes place on, so as the player moves through the game, the camera in the sky also moves to give them the feeling that their location has changed. This should give players the feeling that they are really traveling. As Tim Willits, one of the game's designers put it, "It's just a lot, lot different than [the original] *Quake*."

Valve Software's **HALF-LIFE** takes several steps beyond its *Quake* roots

Quake 2



The Baron

Bullets riddle your plane, shattering wood and shredding canvas. The sky screams with red tracers, smoke and explosions. And as the Red Baron himself blasts out of the sun's glare... as your palms start to sweat and your pulse races... as you hear the ominous groan of stressed wings the instant before they shatter... you realize that this is much more than just a game. This is a taste of history. And your next move will determine whether you become a legend... or another kill in the Baron's book.

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is Back!

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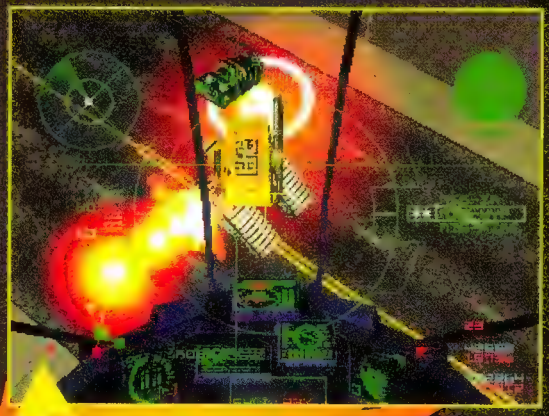
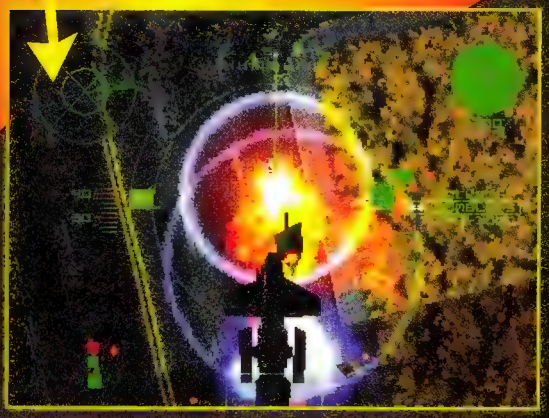
Red Baron II™

Quake 2



G-Police



in several respects, but especially in the level of interaction with the gaming world. "In general, we want almost any entity in the world to be able to take damage – things like glass and weapons will take damage, you can blow up doors and certain walls, push objects around," says Steve Bond, game designer and engineer for Valve. "More interesting examples include that if you see somebody and shoot them with a very explosive weapon, not only are you going to toast them, but there's a pretty good chance you'll destroy any of the things they are carrying as well. In general, most entities support a pretty broad set of events, including taking damage, being painted or pushed, taking on a velocity or momentum."

By Valve's admission, the main strength of the *Quake* engine is that it's incredibly tight and fast and does exactly what it's supposed to do. "*Quake* is far and away the best engine anyone has ever done for rendering static architectures," says Gabe Newell, founder and managing director of Valve. "But *Quake* is a dreary eight bit [color] world and *Half-Life* uses 16-bit software rendering and 24 bit textures. We think this makes our world really interesting to look at, but you pay a performance penalty for doing that. On our target system, compared to an 8-bit engine we'll probably have a 20-30% slower frame rate for an identical geometry. We feel it's a great trade-off for the visual advantages it gives us." While *Half-Life* is still fairly interior based, the designers are using their broad use of better texturing and advanced lighting to try to get rid of the claustrophobic feel of everything being dark. The heightened color scheme and slick graphics have managed to give the game a distinct look and feel to the extent that it almost doesn't seem like a *Quake*-based project.

Ritual Entertainment is taking a very similar approach with **SIN**. The game will have a lot of action- based outcomes that affect how you interact with the environment. For instance, blow up a vat of chemicals and it will flood a sewer in the following level. "What we want to do is a sort of choose your own adventure," Mark Doctorman of Ritual comments. "It won't fundamentally change the outcome of the game but if you go in there with a '*Duke Nukem*-blow-everything-up' attitude you may pay the price later as far as encountering situations that could've been avoided had you thought more about the situation to begin with. It's a way of giving the player a unique gaming experience."

"The interaction with the environment is pretty much the strongest point we have," says Jim Doze, Ritual's vice-president and programmer. "Our level designers are totally into the idea of being able to do everything with the environment. We really enjoy putting in things that people just say 'Wow, I can't believe you can do that' when they see these things. We're trying to make the environment even more true to life than anything ever was. A lot of the stuff was explored in *Duke*, but we really want to take it to a level to where it's not just a lot of little jokes. Like when you walk into a room and see something, then wonder if it works. We want the player to see it and know that it's going to work just by the shape of it. If you see something in our world and wonder if it's going to work, you don't even have to ask – it's going to work."

In a similar mold, Ion Storm is busily modifying the *Quake* engine for both **DAIKATANA**, their first person shooter with an emphasis on storyline and characters (you even have two sidekicks to assist you through the levels), and **ANACHRONOX**, which as Tom Hall, designer for the game, puts it, "is finally going to use the *Quake* engine to the fullest." *Anachronox* is a console-style RPG, similar in form to *Final Fantasy*. "All the other games using the *Quake* engine are wasting a huge strength of it – they strap the camera to your forehead," says Hall. "In *Anachronox*, you will see the player from a 30-degree third-person perspective. No one has done a Japanese-style RPG in full 3D. And, of course, few other games will have sheep-throwing."

One of the most versatile engines around is Bethesda's **XNGINE**, which is getting some pretty hefty overhauls for the slew of forthcoming titles utilizing it. One of the biggest advances in the latest version of XnGine (v3.0) is the addition of 15-bit hi-color (32,000 colors). All of the games are still DOS based, and the new version will use concave polygons, polygons with holes and transparent polygons. "The XnGine is very versatile," says Peter Sauerbrei, head of R&D. "We've got a game set in space which you'd never see with the *Quake* engine. We're not using a BSP tree, which means that indoor we don't get as much speed as the *Quake* engine would, but outdoor we can go anywhere. By the time all the new games ship, they'll all be using the same

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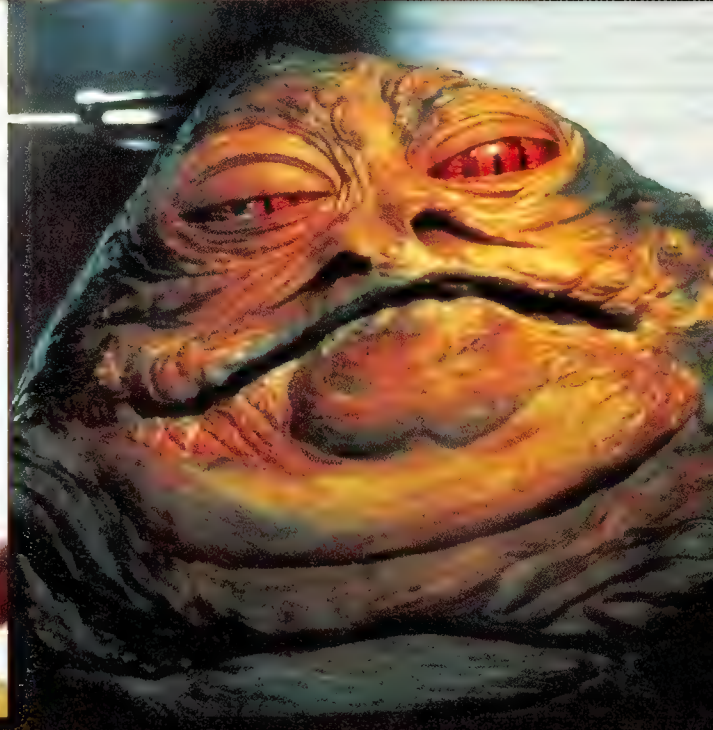
3Dfx

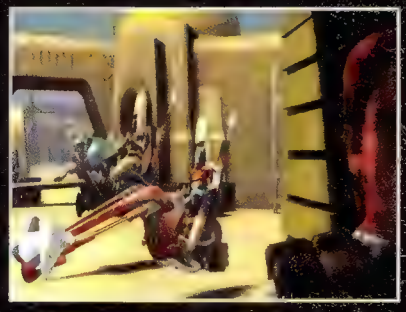
THRUSTMASTER

AGES 13 TO ADULT
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB



You're Dash Rendar - quick on the trigger of a blaster.

It's you and your tiny snowspeeder versus a giant, Imperial AT-AT.



Speeder bike mode - fast-paced action with a kick start.

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TEEN T AGES 13+ ESRB

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engine. We totally scrapped version 2.0 and started again to get 3.0."

One unique aspect of XnGine is that every frame of the database is downloaded to the engine – it loads from memory constantly, unlike in a game like *Quake* where it loads the whole level at one time. "By not having the entire world always in memory, we don't have to have like 10 megabytes worth of objects in memory at once," Sauerbrei explains. "We can have just the 50 objects that we need that are in view and bring up the other ones as we need them whereas in *Quake* they have the whole level always in memory. We save a little on memory so that we can have more textures and make them look better." The latest version of the XnGine is entirely floating point, which gives a solid speed increase over past Bethesda games. "The floating point conversion started in April to accommodate *10th Planet* because some of the distances were just so huge that the fixed point parts were dying big death," he continues. "And eventually it just became faster than the fixed point version so we used it with all the games."

Psygnosis has always been a company known for visually impressive games and is one of the first of the early 3D accelerator adopters to move to total dependence on the cards. But now with a game like the upcoming, urban-based helicopter shooter, **G POLICE**, the company is trying to use the power of 3D cards and their custom 3D engines to enhance the environment in general. Neil Duffield, *G Police* Designer, says, "Basically, the more the graphical quality increases, the more the potential for a great game. However there is also more potential to get the balance wrong. As games do in fact evolve and 'grow up,' the challenge to achieve greater and greater realism will eventually move away from graphics. This promises to be an exciting new challenge." Aside from excellent visuals, *G Police*'s defining factor is that the game takes place within an active domed city, complete with plenty of innocent bystanders (no pedestrians, however) going about their daily business and what the company refers to as a "working traffic system."

"In *G-Police* we took this (graphic quality) one step further by having a living, breathing city going on around you, with busy civilian traffic driving and flying around you, obeying road laws etc. When you go into battle with an enemy, this civilian traffic can and does get in the way, often with spectacular results," says Graham Davis, *G Police* Producer. "This I feel moves us a step closer to representing reality, it doesn't feel so much that just 'you and the baddies' exist, but that you are all part of a bigger thing, and if that's the case, who knows what's around the corner?"

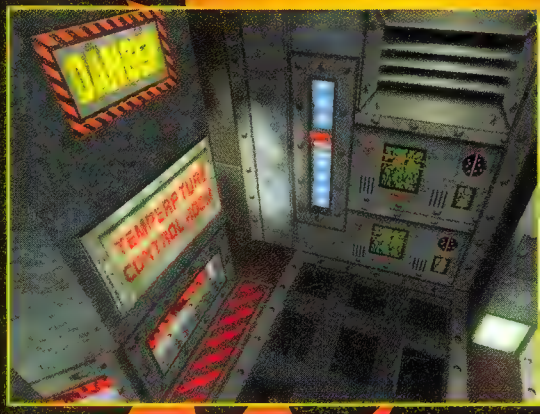
DEATHTRAP DUNGEON, Eidos' third person game not starring Lara, is a similar sort of thing. While the game's engine looks similar to *Tomb Raider*'s, it's actually custom built for this game. You'll still be seeing a lot of levels designed for running and jumping (and slashing), and the engine is able to offer vast looking architectures similar to those in *Tomb Raider*, wherein the engine uses the lighting and shading to help keep the frame rate from bottoming out. The third person perspective the game uses was chosen due to the fact the game uses close range combat against multiple opponents (there are ranged and magic attacks as well) and will also be heavy on the gore factor, with the ability to hack limbs off sure to make blood spout profusely. *Deathtrap*'s level architecture is quite distinctive and shows off a variety of fantasy settings, including gothic cathedral-like structures and standard dungeons and castles. The effective use of the engine's lighting and action-orientated play aspects make it feel very different from *Tomb Raider*.

LOOKING INTO THE CRYSTAL BALL

Leading the pack of the next, next generation is 3D Realms' **PREY**. This 3D hardware-only title takes a fundamentally different approach from *Quake* or the others and uses something called Portal Technology. The *Quake* engine and *Unreal* are based on an approach that utilizes BSP trees, which break down an environment and basically pre-calculate all the possible polygons that you can see from any possible location in the world. This means that essentially 95% of the architecture is static because the game pre-computes all possible views of the scene, which is why in games like *Quake* and *Unreal*, you basically have doors and platforms that move around but that's about it.

What 3D Realms is doing with the *Prey* engine is devise an approach that allows for completely dynamic environments. "What Portal does is allow us to deal with smaller sets of geometry real-time, so there's no pre-computed visibility whatsoever in *Prey*, which means we can make floors undulate, ceilings fall, walls can blow out, things can

Sin



Deathtrap Dungeon

10th Planet

PARADISE LOST...

What Went Wrong?

Henrietta Emerson

Age: 64

Retired

DECEASED

Former charity worker and treasurer of the Wives of Foreign War Veterans. Killed tragically during anti-videogame violence protest rally.

Ronald Wanker

Age: 52

DECEASED

Mental Health Technician

Employed at Paradise Psychiatric Center for 27 years. Fatally wounded by multiple bullet wounds.

Jennie Peters

Age: 17

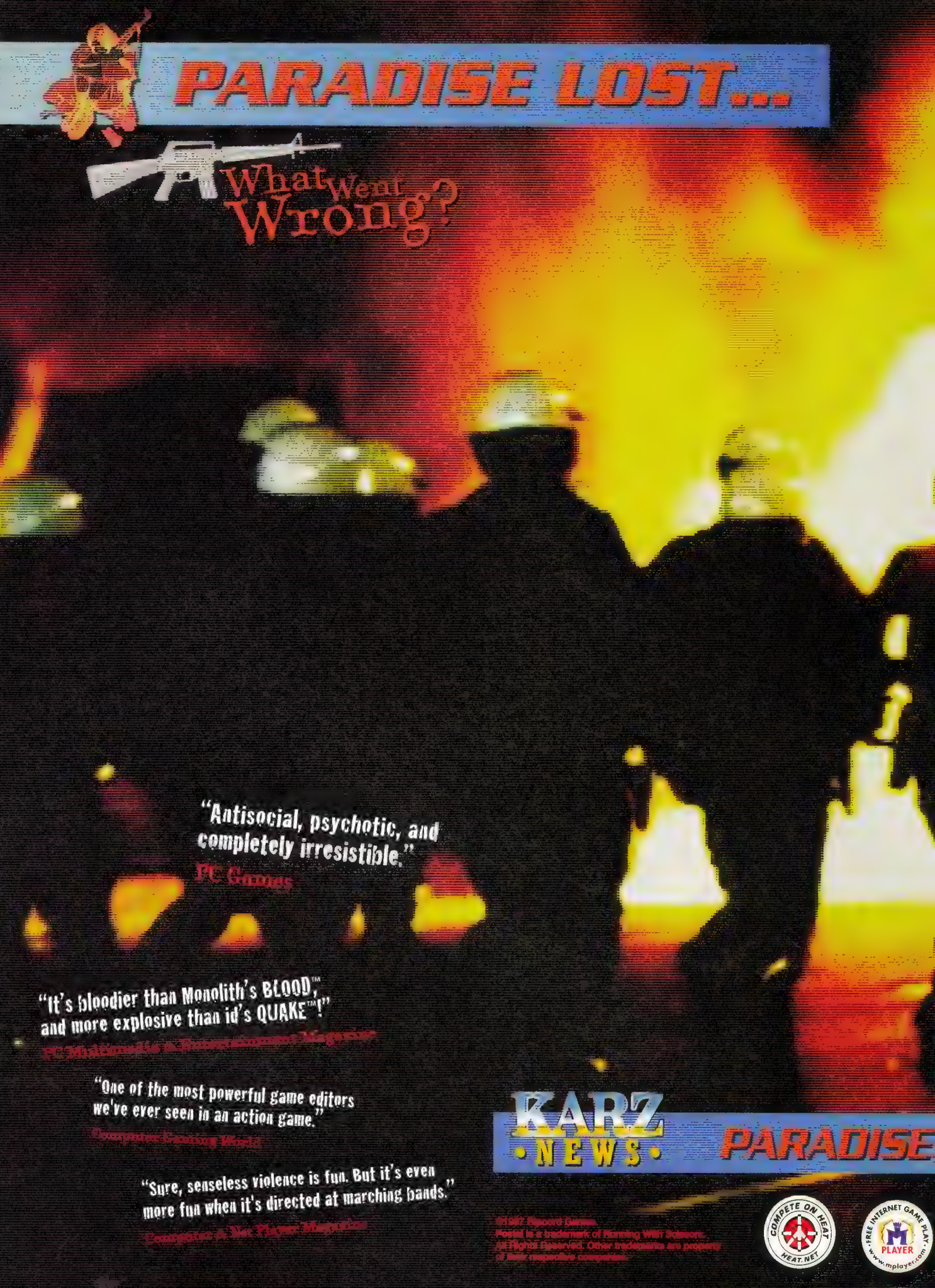
DECEASED

Paradise High Senior

Majorette in local youth marching band. Death caused by 3rd degree burns inflicted by exploding napalm.

KARZ NEWS

PARADISE, ARIZONA LIVE


PARADISE LOST...
What Went Wrong?
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"It's bloodier than Monolith's BLOOD™, and more explosive than id's QUAKE™!"
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- Real-time 3D characters rage against beautifully hand-painted killing fields.
- So freakin' real, your victims will actually beg for mercy and scream for their lives!
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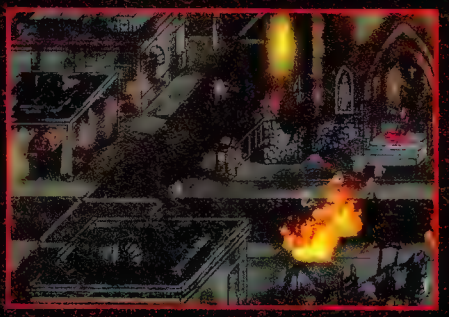
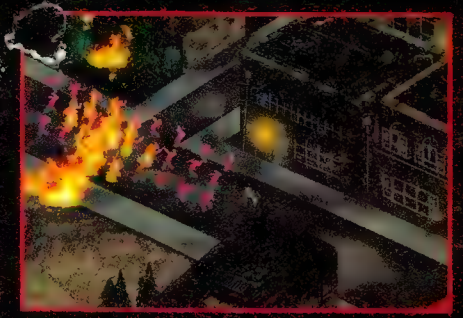
- **Complete Game Editor included.** No bull, this is the one we used to create the game. Create and manipulate characters, actions and personalities.





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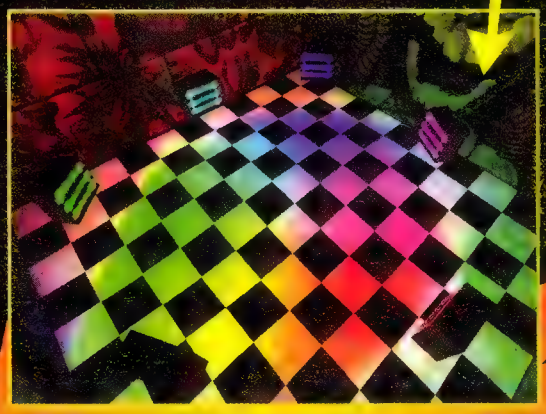
MATURE M AGES 17+ CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Prey



Star Trek First Contact

Daikatana

collapse, anything can be moved," explains Paul Schytuma, project leader for *Prey*. "You can't deform the actual polygonal faces on anything in *Quake*. But in *Prey*, it's absolutely theoretically possible to blow up any wall or floor, etc in the game. The smallest unit our engine deals with is called a region which are easiest to think of as rooms, but can be anything, and portals are essentially the windows and doors – the pathways into other regions. We also allow our portals to be dynamic – they can be arbitrarily created, rotated, transformed, moved in real-time. Essentially they become rips in space. Mathematically this makes *Prey* a 4D game, it has an addition geometrical dimension beyond the third dimension because you can have multiple three dimension environments existing within the same four dimensional space."

Before *Prey* strikes, *Duke* will. Due sometime around the summer of '98, **DUKE NUKEM FOREVER** will utilize the *Quake* 2 engine, as opposed to the current *Quake* licensees that are basically using a hybrid version that lies somewhere between the original engine and sequel's. Little word on the game at this time since 3D Realms is only in the planning and every popular "wait and see what our competitors do" stage, but development should start full steam around November, when the *Quake* 2 code should be done. The game is taking place in and around Los Vegas and designers hope to create realistic environments for Duke to destroy. And of course, they have assured us that they'll work strippers in there somewhere, somehow.

While it uses the *Unreal* engine, MicroProse's **STAR TREK FIRST CONTACT**'s design is vastly different from any other first person game. One of the biggest differences in terms of the design is that everything takes place onboard the Enterprise.

"*Unreal* is a level clearing game," producer Michael Mancuso says. "So our challenge was to adapt the engine so that you can move to any level at any time and you can also switch from character to character as well." One of the main aspects of the game is the patrol element, as one of your main goals is to find the location of the Borg on the Enterprise. There will be a number of preset areas, which will change from game to game, from where the Borg start their assimilation of the starship – like very deep into the computer core, the sublight engine areas, or some other back corner of the Enterprise. Since modeling the entire ship would have been impractical from both a gameplay and data size, MicroProse has only recreated the essential areas of the ship.

"Anything that was in the movie is faithfully recreated in the game," Mancuso continues. "And for other things, we've gotten approval on all our designs from Paramount." In addition, Paramount has given the developers surprising leeway with the interaction of the title as well. Players will be able to blow up the Enterprise, and the main characters can be killed or assimilated.

Interplay's **DESCENT III** will be sporting a brand new engine when it comes out around Christmas '98. While it will still mainly be another inside action game, the geometry will be totally arbitrary so designers should be able to have pretty much any kind of room or shape that they can make up, as opposed to the older *Descent* engine where everything was basically made out of deformed cubes. The gameplay will be very similar, but Parallax says it will look pretty different from the older games. "We're hoping for a much greater sense of place," says Matt Toschlog, one of the founders of Parallax, "so that in research facilities or a factory level it will look a lot more like that sort of place. In the older games, the levels all looked pretty much the same." A big change will be that while the main focus is still indoor, there will be times when you can fly out of the mine and engage in combat on the surface. "We basically have an indoor and an outdoor engine with a seamless transfer between them," he continues. "We can do some cool things this way, like have parts of the world that you can't get to unless you fly through a mine and find a way through a locked door, then get to another part of the outside where you can get something you need to finish the level. It really enhances the variety of the levels quite a bit."

Developers are making an almost universal move toward using 3D engines in all their games, and while the first improvement we'll likely see (and have seen) is, rather regrettably, visual, elements like design, AI and story are finally taking their rightful place in the forefront of new developments. Software companies are refitting role-playing games and strategy titles to exist in true 3D worlds, action games are finally evolving, and the genres are all mixing with each other as designers struggle to figure out new and interesting things to do with all the new toys available that make the PC the top gaming platform on the planet. In short, if things go well we've got a lot to look forward to in state-of-the-art bang-bang gaming. *–Jason D'Aprile*

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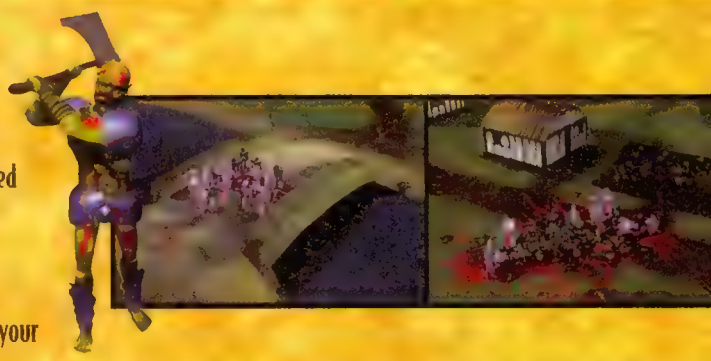

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myth
THE FALLEN LORDS

THE LAUNCH OF STARSHIP TITANIC

Douglas Adams reveals the tip of the iceberg

42 – THE ONLY ANSWER WE'LL EVER NEED

NICKNAMED FUNNEL MOUTH, THIS BOT RIVALS YOUR HOOVER UPRIGHT

by Brenda Garneau

From the moment Douglas Adams ditched his typewriter for a computer, he has been fascinated by its creative possibilities. In 1996, he became a founding partner of The Digital Village, a multiple-media publishing company based in London, England.

The first big project for The Digital Village is *Starship Titanic*, an original story and game written and designed for the PC, to be published by Simon & Shuster Interactive. In this interview with Brenda Garneau, Adams takes us into the village and aboard the ship for a rare view into the world of his creative genius.

CGS+: You have a long history in this industry, Douglas, back to its early days with Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, a game you did with Steve Meretzky.

DOUGLAS ADAMS: Yes, I worked with Steve at Infocom about, oh, 12, 13, or 14 years ago. So I go back a long way, but most of it is "gap."

So after you did Hitchhiker's Guide way back when, what caused the gap?

Oh, very simple. I loved the text-only games, which were effectively interactive storytelling whereby you could almost get involved in a conversation with the machine. In about 1985, computer graphics started to arrive, and suddenly everyone lost interest in text games. Although text obviously can be an enormous stimulus to the imagination, it doesn't look that good on the screen. So, when graphics started to arrive, they just knocked text games out of the water. But the graphics? They were dreadful. You know, the graphics in the mid-eighties were terribly slow and clunky and ugly and course and crude, and I just thought, "Well this certainly doesn't look terribly interesting to me. I'll wait until the technology get a little better and the graphics get good." So, that took us up 'til now.

Did you actually start work on a sequel for Hitchhiker's Guide a long time ago?

No. Infocom was always very keen to do one, but my feeling was that I was suffering from "sequelitis" by that time. [Laughs] So, I seem to remember that we laid plans to do another one, but it hadn't really got very far. At the time, basically, what Infocom did, well, as the name suggests it was not originally meant to be a games company. It was all these people who came out of MIT to set up a business software company, and while they were looking around for investment and the right projects to be worked on, [they figured] we might as well get the company turning over by putting out these games we did while we were at MIT. That, of course, was *Zork*. And so, we put that out just for fun and it turned into a big hit, and so we turned out another one and another one, and gradually, we found that we inadvertently had become a games company. It came to a point where the CEO sort of put his foot down and said, "I didn't become CEO of a games company. I want to be doing serious and proper business software." So, they got a whole lot of new investment and a whole lot of new staff, and they built this natural language-based database and information manager called *CornerStone*. It was a very good bit of design, but the business world is not going to buy something that has come out of a games company. So, they sold about a half-dozen copies of that, having sunk about six million dollars into it, and it sank without a trace, sadly, taking the whole company with it.

The age of graphics has turned us, pretty much, into people who just click on the screen. There's no game but, god, those pictures sure are pretty. You have something different in your new game, state-of-the-art language technology?

Well, if I can go back a bit, the point where I began to get interested in the field again was when *Myst* appeared. It suddenly set a whole new benchmark. Once *Myst* appeared, you could never do a game where the graphics were less good than that. On the other hand, *Myst*, as we know, for all its beautiful design, was a rather empty environment. Well, I find that. So, it would always be in the back of my mind. I'd watch all the point-and-click games and think that all of the real interaction and engagement you got from being virtually locked in a conversation with the machine, something you used to get with the Infocom games, was effectively lost.

That was in my mind very powerfully when it came to designing this game, *Starship Titanic*. We had to draw forward all

of those techniques. Now, of course, in the Infocom games, the parser was not only in charge of you handling bits of dialogue with the characters, but actually had to carry the whole logic of the game. In these games, that's not the case. All the parser has to handle is just the dialogue when you interact with the characters. Actually, we're getting slightly anxious about it, because our data budget is getting way out of control. [Laughs] We have something like nine hours of dialogue in this game, and we're going to be recording another hour in the next few days because of all the gaps we've now spotted. We were very strict with ourselves to begin with. It was going to be a one CD-ROM game, because you know how people hate to juggle disks all the time, but I'm afraid we went up to three, and we're still struggling to get it all in. In an absolutely ideal world, such as the one we don't live in, then the way we would have handled the conversation would have been slightly different, and obviously there are three different stages to any conversation engine. One is the input, one is the output, and the other is the tricky bit, which is in between. The tricky bit that is in between is a conversation engine written for us, actually, by Linda Watson of the Virtus Corporation. It was originally called TrueTalk, but then we discovered that somebody else had control of that name, so we had to change it at the last minute to Velocitext, which I must say sounds to me like a 1950's typewriter, but there you go. [Laughs] So, obviously, the heart of that is the bit that happens in between. The AI or the assessment of the input and the selecting of output. In an ideal world, then the input would be speech recognition, but of course we are not there yet. So we've reverted to typing.

Something you think the point-and-click hordes are ready for?

It's interesting, because a few years ago if you said to people that you're going to have to type within the context of the game, they would have looked at you as if you were completely mad. Then, since the rise of the Internet and chat lines and so forth, people are suddenly much more used to typing again. So, we've emerged into a post-post-literate world, where people can actually type again. And, at the other end, again in an ideal world, we would have had text-to-speech [capability] which would allow the conversation parser much more flexibility in constructing responses. However, nine hours of text-to-speech would be extremely wearing on the ear. In fact, nine minutes of text-to-speech is *extremely* wearing on the ear, because every character ends up sounding either like Stephen Hawking or some tough Scandinavian. That turned out not to be the right solution.

So, you've got a small team of actors who have played all the parts and just recorded every possible variation of every particular response, and, if not, I've written a lot of dialogue. I think that will give people a very, very rich experience. Inevitably, we are going to be cursing and swearing at ourselves once the thing is out. "Oh, God, we did foresee that people would ask this or do that?" So, you have to build in as many deflectors as possible. I have polite and entertaining ways of saying, "You know, I haven't the faintest idea what you are talking about." [Laughs] But, we've got some extremely entertaining characters. One of them I should mention. They're all robots except one who's a parrot, a semi-deranged parrot. It's being played by Terry Gilliam of *Monty Python*, and it was, I think, the part he was born to play.

It sounds, you're really directly involved in the development here.

Oh, absolutely. The one thing that I'm kind of prepared for is people saying to me, "Oh, I know what you did. You just signed over the rights and turned up at a meeting once a month." But, this has been my full-time activity, five days a week, eight hours a day for the last year or so.

As a writer where you've got 300 pages to fill with words, do you ever feel limited by the computer medium? Confined to, like you say, perhaps nine hours of text? Did you ever feel limited by it?

Well each medium you go into, it gives you all sorts of new opportunities that no other medium has, but also, all sorts of limitations. Yes, the limitations of the computer medium are legion but the possibilities are also vast.

> '...text-to-speech is extremely wearing on the ear, because every character ends up sounding either like Stephen Hawking or some tough Scandinavian'

[LEFT] EITHER IT'S SUNLIGHT, OR ADAMS IS BATHED IN A MYSTERIOUS ETHEREAL GLOW

SPIRALING INTO THE VOID

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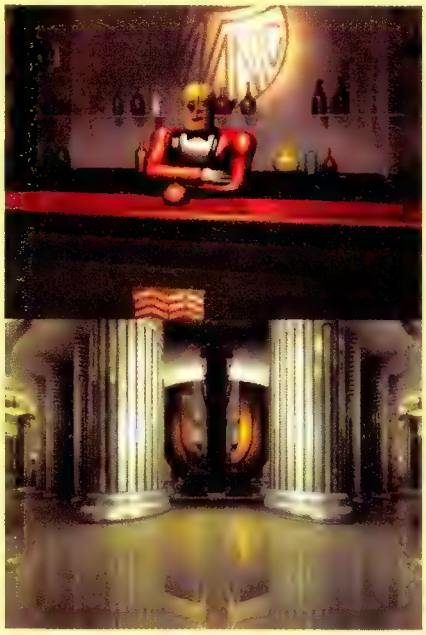

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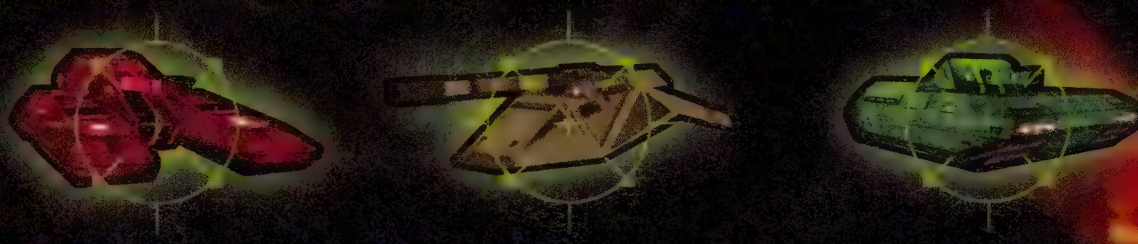

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Calamity was taken out by a prox mine.
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Smed: Okay...
Smed: Obviously someone can't read.
Smed: Do NOT shoot me.
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Yes, the most fabulous, beautiful, most technologically advanced, gorgeously outfitted, gorgeously designed starship, a cruise liner called The Starship Titanic, has been built in the middle of a galactic civilization of which we know nothing. It's the most advanced ship ever built. Technologically, it cannot possibly go wrong, and on its maiden voyage, it crashes into hyperspace and disappears. And where it lands? It crashes into your house, on it. So, you find your way up into this ship, or not if you want to play a two-minute version of the game. You find yourself in this environment which is a cross between The Queen Mary, the Chrysler building, Tutenkahmen's Tomb and Venice. It's just the interior, and it's fabulous, gorgeous. You gradually discover that all is not as it might be.

There are also some things that have gone wrong with it, and there are some unfinished bits. It's staffed with a lot of slightly dysfunctional robots and a semi-deranged parrot. You gradually begin to discover what's gone wrong. So, essentially it's an exploring and puzzle solving game. By the end, you should have unraveled the whole of it all to take the thing back to Earth.

In Hitchhiker's way back when, the game actually lied to the player . . .
Yes. I think there's one particular character, actually I don't want to give too much away, but you'll find there's a place in ship you can go and change all sorts of behavior characteristics of the robots. If you change one of its characteristics, well, then everything he tells you will be untrue. [Laughs]

'...a semi-deranged parrot [is] being played by Terry Gilliam of Monty Python, and it was, I think, the part he was born to play'

You already have so many fans, and with Starship Titanic, you'll probably take that even further. Can you tell me a bit about the game?
Well, yes. It's an exploring-type adventure game. Absolutely, I do want to make this clear, it's *absolutely* non-violent except for what happens to a flock of starlings; and it's a funny game, basically, with some extremely strange and intriguing puzzles in it. A lot of the puzzles are extremely silly, but a lot of them are also very cool and very clever. There's one, one of the star puzzles in the game, it's right at the very end, and it's completely unlike anything else in the game, which has mostly been quite silly. There's a beautiful problem that you have right at the end, getting the ship back to Earth. You have to solve a three-dimensional navigation problem wearing red/blue glasses. I think that will sort of catch everybody by surprise.

What's the future for The Digital Village?
What I will be moving onto next after we finish the *Starship Titanic* by the end of this year will be movies. It's the one medium I have yet to crack, and it's really bugging me. [Laughs] So, possible projects have come and gone, but this time I am determined. This is where I am going to focus my attention. It is absurd that I have not managed to do this properly yet. So, obviously, with some of the resources that we have now created here at The Digital Village, both in terms of all of our animators and our graphic artists and so on, and their developing skills for the web, it means that we can go into partnership with a studio or an independent or whatever, and not only provide the story and the script, but a lot of the facilities for making the film as well. Now that's an ambitious project, but that's what we are sort of structuring ourselves to do. And, as I said, then everything we do will have a major home on the web.

But having said that, of course, one major preexistent entity is *The Hitchhiker's Guide,* which by staggering coincidence not only has a very, very high cross-over with the web, in terms of demographics of its audience, but it also provides a model for how you'd think about creating an electronic guide service. So, we intend to create something based on *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. The actual entity of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* will be one of the core things that we will be doing here. So, it's suddenly something for me. I mean, after having drifted into boredom writing books, suddenly I've got a whole new set of worlds to conquer. It's great.

[LEFT] DOUGLAS ADAMS REVOLUTIONIZES THE TEXT-ENHANCED ADVENTURE

HALF GONDOLA, HALF CONQUISTADOR

[RIGHT] MAY I TAKE YOUR COAT AND BRAIN, SIR?

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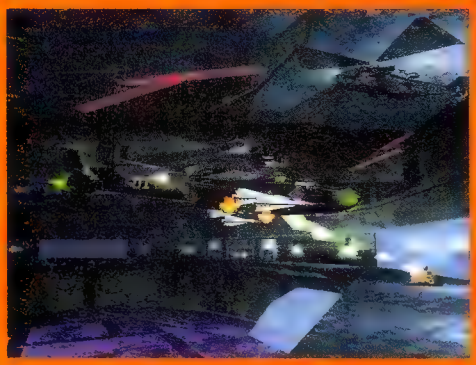

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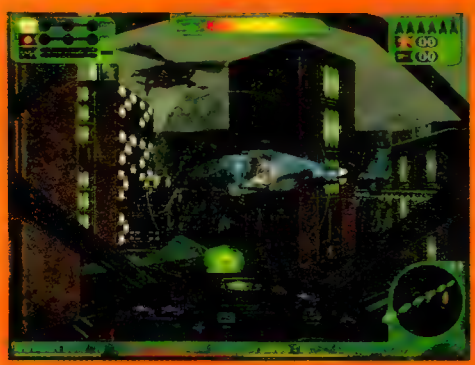

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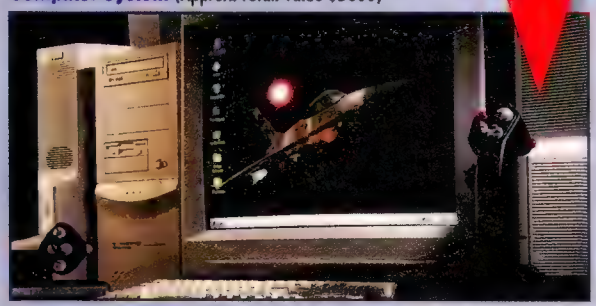

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Blue Byte

Sid Meier's Gettysburg

March to the sound of gaming's big guns

Firaxis • Windows 95

Tucked away in a subdued penthouse office suite outside of Baltimore is perhaps one of the most intense concentrations of computer game design talent on the East Coast (if not the country). Home of the trinary game development stars Sid Meier, Jeff Briggs, and Brian Reynolds, they've been pretty quiet during their first year in business; now, however, they're about to come storming into the turbulent battlefield of computer game sales with their first product, *Sid Meier's Gettysburg*.

The History

Game industry watchers are probably familiar with Sid's long interest in the Civil War, but many may not be familiar with just how far back his interest goes. While talking with Sid Meier in his office, he pulled out a somewhat careworn book on the Civil War, owned since his childhood. Opening to a detailed, ¾ perspective-view painting of a battlefield, Meier says "I always knew I wanted to write a game that looked like that, that had that kind of feeling to it." Indeed, one of the earliest programs he attempted back in the days of the Atari 800 was a crude Civil War game, and the idea has been something he's kept alive while computer technology has caught up.

To implement his long time vision, however, a big decision had to be made, and that decision was to make the game real-time: "A game that looks like that has to be real-time." The dangers of such an approach, however, haven't been ignored: "…there's a problem with real-time time games in terms of the player actually feeling that they're playing the game. You need to be very careful that you don't lose the player, that the game doesn't run away from the player, that you don't give the player too many complicated problems where they feel like they're always trying to catch up – it's no fun." He says they are trying to make the game "where *you* feel like *you're* playing the game and you don't feel the game is playing you."

Games dealing with historic battles are typically regarded as complex, dull exercises by many gamers. Indeed, in *Gettysburg* there are plenty of real-world, wargame-like things being tracked behind the scenes, and even more that play some part up-front, but in typically Meier-esque fashion, fun will be foremost. Much of this will be achieved through simplification of gameplay elements, especially the interface. Meier says "It's always been my philosophy – I think *Civilization* was an example of this – [that] it's great if you can take a number of simple and individually understandable systems and make them all work together in a way that the interaction creates the complexity." From this created complexity comes immersion; "our goal is to get you to forget you're playing a computer game."

A Confederate vice is about to clamp down on the Union lines

Early rides alone across a field littered with Union dead

The 15th Mass. faces a Confederate charge. The faint gridlines help show the terrain relief but can be turned off

This zoomed-out view shows the lines of battle anchored on Gettysburg itself

Campaigning in Pennsylvania

From design philosophy comes designs, and from designs, eventually, a game; *Gettysburg* is certainly that. Firaxis takes a somewhat different approach in that they don't recreate the whole battle. Instead, the game consists of linked scenarios that, as Jeff Briggs notes, put the player in control of the action at critical moments in the battle. Current plans have the campaign game consisting of ten historic and eleven hypothetical actions (although this number may change); unlike many other real-time strategy games, the campaign is not linear but tree shaped, and your performance in one battle may lead you down an ahistoric path. Casualty effects from one scenario will carry over to another as you play through the campaign. Firaxis plans a full set of tutorial scenarios, complete with step-by-step instruction on how to move and fight your troops.

Twenty-odd missions may not sound like many, but that's only the start. Built into the game is a full random mission generator that lets you specify the kind and size of battle you want to fight, number of objectives, and more; hit a button and you'll be placed at a random spot on the map. The game will almost certainly *not* contain a scenario editor but will instead ship with something perhaps even better: complete documentation on the scenario data files and formats (something that proved quite popular in *Civilization II*).

To battle!

A nice campaign system is nothing without battles to play, and it's in battles that gamers will spend most of their time. In each scenario gamers will be fighting with two to six brigades; each brigade will have a number of individual regiments (the smallest units in the game). You as the player don't represent any particular person, but can consider yourself a division-level (or perhaps even corps-level) leader. A bar of options along the bottom of the screen lets you issue your orders. While you can directly command individual regiments, it's very important to keep your units in position and under control lest their vulnerable flanks get exposed to enemy assault. Because of this, you spend most of your time controlling your units at the brigade level.

Control is almost entirely mouse based, although the game never devolves into a click fest. Even when the action gets heavy, the pause feature gives you plenty of time to consider your options and issue orders (you can issue as many orders as you want while paused). Select a unit, order it into column formation, drag the mouse to tell it where to go, then tell it to assume a battle line facing a certain direction.

Sound plays an important part in *Gettysburg*. It's in stereo; you may hear the sound of horses from your left speaker, a good indicator that your opponent is moving cavalry or artillery to a flank. Click on a unit and you get the sounds that unit is reporting; if it's a unit marching to the front you may only hear the distant sounds of battle, but if it's fully engaged you'll hear the full roar of combat. You will also hear voices issuing orders and delivering reports, all of which will be cues to you

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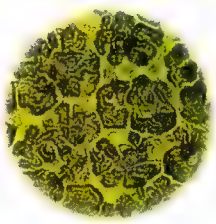

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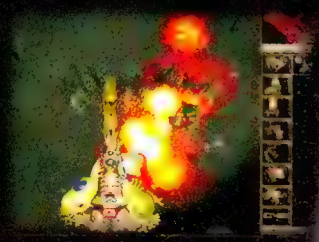

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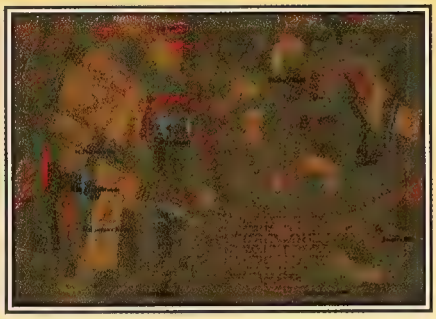
Union forces (infantry and artillery) on Cemetery Ridge; the Rebel commander faces a tough assault

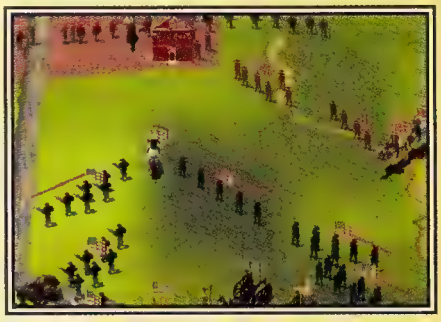


The replay feature - examine your defeats and crow over your victories

While you can order individual regiments, brigade-level orders are the only way to maintain control in the long run.

The analysis feature helps you examine terrain effects and unit facings

Gettysburg wasn't all open fields; the fighting in rough terrain was some of the bloodiest of the battle



Multiple zoom levels let you focus on a tactical fight or get an idea of the big picture

about the unit's status.

Morale is another key component of *Gettysburg*. In the game, many things effect a unit's morale, and most of them are variable. Units that rout run away from the main part of the fighting; you can send a leader to attempt to rally them (thus withdrawing that leader's positive morale effects from the units still on the line), but this takes time. Given the time scale of each scenario, units will rarely if ever be completely wiped out, but they can surrender (big victory point hit, that). Supply is not tracked in the game; Firaxis is assuming units would have had the ammo to last the length of the engagements modeled. Also, Jeff believes that supply is "too much work for too little fun."

Once the engagement reaches its planned end you can either choose to keep fighting or view a replay. Unlike the actual fighting, replays fully expose the positions of each side, letting you see where you messed up or showing off your tactical genius (you can also save the replays along with the just-ended game). When we asked if they considered including "replays" of the actual historical engagements (potentially useful for new historical gamers) Jeff said no; he figures people would only watch those a couple of times at most and says "We – at least I – have a philosophy about things people only see once or twice: it seems like a lot of work for not much payoff. We're not doing huge flashy openings or stuff like that; we want to focus our energy on stuff that is important and that's the gameplay."

The wiliest opponent

After admitting that he's not the biggest proponent of multiplayer (not because he doesn't like it, but because he feels current designs are still constrained by single-player ideas), Meier had to laugh as he changed gears to acknowledge that multiplay will be a big component of *Gettysburg*. Current plans call for two player modem or direct connect play, and up to eight players (four on a side) via LAN; Electronic Arts is working on a hosting system for Internet play, but at the time of this writing the details haven't been finalized. Cooperative team play has a significant role in the multiplayer component. Aside from adding cooperation (something too-little seen in computer gaming), it lets Firaxis add another "element of realism we can't simulate with a single player."

The original team-play design was rigid, with one player on the side acting as an overall commander and all sub-commanders limited in what they could control. This approach was dropped when they discovered that, according to Meier, "being the big cheese wasn't all that much fun"; also, the rigid approach forced gamer cooperation instead of fostering it. The system they settled on instead is open; players on a side can issue orders to any of the forces on that side. While this leaves open the door for chaos, it also lets gamers approach their cooperative games as they want to. Another benefit of the open system becomes obvious when someone drops out of the game; instead of coming to a halt, the other players on the team can take over the duties of the AWOL gamer.

One final question many might ask is why Gettysburg? Why, as the first Firaxis title, do a Civil War game (and therefore risk getting labeled a "wargame," a term that causes the marketing types to cringe)? Sid Meier says that the Civil War is "a great topic because the people who participated were so much like us." Indeed, but for the span of 140-odd years they *would* have been us, and that, in the end, is perhaps what makes *Sid Meier's Gettysburg* a game Firaxis would do, and one we will look forward to. –*Scott Udell*

Next stop: Alpha Centauri

While Firaxis currently has only 14 employees (and plans to stay close to that; Jeff Briggs believes the way to make great games is to stay small), that's enough for two development projects, which is what they have. Hidden from view and little discussed is Brian Reynolds' turn-based space empire game project, *Alpha Centauri*. Just because they're keeping mum on the project doesn't mean it's not well under way (Brian admits that, at the time of this writing, they're already testing multiplayer in the game); instead, they just want to keep the spotlight focused on *Gettysburg* for now. Expect this to change soon after *Gettysburg*'s release. *Alpha Centauri* is currently scheduled for a mid-98 release.

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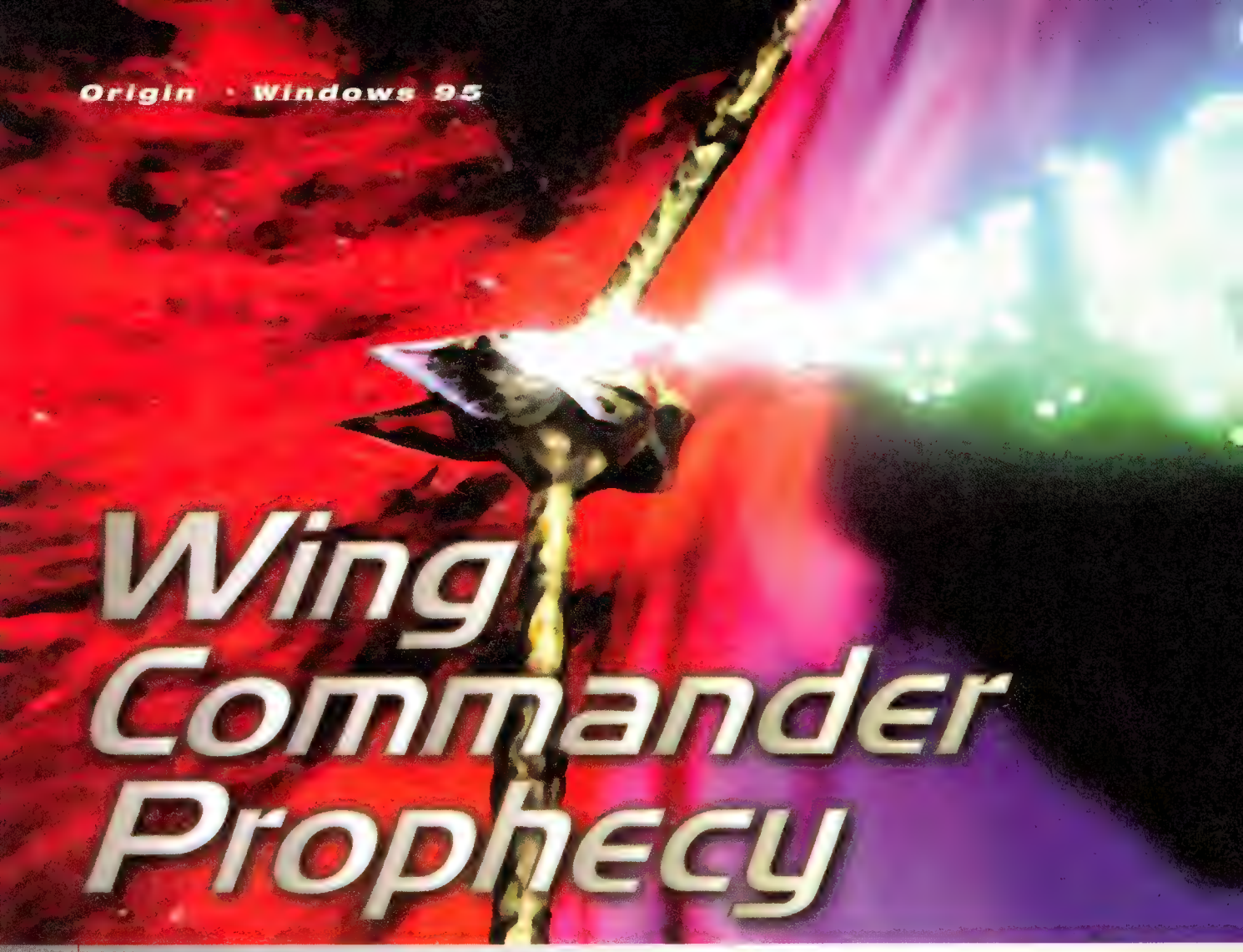


Wing Commander Prophecy

Stepping into the *Wing Commander* portion of Origin's headquarters feels very much like stumbling into a college dormitory. The average age looks to be about twenty one. All these kids are roaming the halls or standing in doorways, talking. The offices are more like dorm rooms than workplaces. Billy Cain's office is crammed with toys and collectibles heaped onto shelves and piled on the floor; one wall is taken up with a futon in *Toy Story* sheets. Jeff Grills' dimmed, monitor-lined office looks like a rayless dungeon where the guy who has a final tomorrow is holed up. Adam Foshko's office would be the seduction pad, decked out with some sort of art deco look in bright primary colors and featuring a zebra-skin divan; if it were more restrained, it might be pretentious.

If this were indeed a dorm, Rod Nakamoto would be the RA. He is probably the oldest guy around here, as well as the executive producer for *Wing Commander: Prophecy*, replacing Chris Roberts. Sitting around a table sucking down coffee, he slowly nurses a bottle of water instead, letting the others talk and only occasionally offering a softly-spoken comment. Nakamoto's calm silence seems to bespeak the wisdom and experience he must have earned in his years at Sega. As various team members describe the new management and teamwork concepts they're using, it's difficult not to wonder how many of these ideas originated with Nakamoto. After all, how would these kids know words like "empower?"

Teamwork

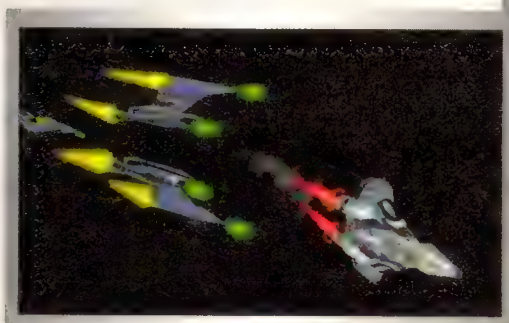
Nakamoto contrasts *Wing Commander: Prophecy* with the earlier installments. "Now we're doing a game that the team wants to do," he says quietly, "The fact of the matter is that it takes twenty-five people to make a product of this size, not just one person." His comment is perhaps in reference to Chris Roberts' style; as one person explained, the previous games were all in Chris' head, and if you wanted to know something, you had to track him down and ask him.

Frank Roan, the project director, explains how the production has been divided into components: programming, art, design, sound, and movies. " We want to make sure it's a shared vision and this has allowed for debates. We've had arguments for hours and I think that's great, because for the last four years, it hasn't been this way. We make sure the components are talking to each other, but otherwise we let the experts take care of what needs to be done." Billy Cain, the lead designer who's in charge of making sure the components talk, puts it this way: "I'm like a road manager and they're like musicians: I try to stay out of their way and let them do their thing."

One of these "musicians" is Jeff Grills, the lead technology programmer and the man behind the game's Vision Engine, a 3D engine rescued from a canceled project. His office has a desk full of monitors on which he calls up various game elements to demonstrate what the engine can do. "The first priority here is speed," he says, quick to point out that he doesn't rely on hardware for that speed, "This is a P133 here. Up until a week ago, I had a P90. I try to stay on the platform consumers will play on." He explains how the engine uses floating point calculations to take advantage of Pentiums.

At E3, the accelerated version was running alongside the non-accelerated version. Although certain effects are missing without the acceleration, the team claims none of the speed is sacrificed. Roan explains why they took pains to ensure this: "I don't think it's fair for a company to say that when you get an accelerator, you're going to get 20 frames per second, but until then, you'll only get 9 or 10. We feel both our software and our hardware rasterizers need to have a reasonable framerate. You just get more immersiveness when you go to higher quality hardware."

In creating that immersiveness, the Vision Engine has a number of tricks up its sleeve, like ambient and colored lighting, allowing for special effects like flying within nebulae. There are also the standard flashy weapon effects like missile trails and kills with translucent explosions. "I can take a single object and put a plane out in space and only draw that object on one half of the plane," Grills says, "So we can have this big wormhole effect where you'll see the ship coming out of one side. If you look at the other side, there's nothing there. We'll be able to do that in the actual gameplay," he says proudly.



Grills types out a few lines of code and conjures up some enormous capital ships. The capital ships are vast, conveying a tremendous sense of size; it's much like the first view of a Star Destroyer in the opening scene of *Star Wars*. Before leaving, Grills uses his keyboard to invoke a Manta, an elaborate and colorful alien ship with a flat hammerhead, stubby butterfly wings, and glowing tendrils trailing behind it. "It's just beautiful," he murmurs, turning it over delicately as if it were an exotic sea creature.

Aliens

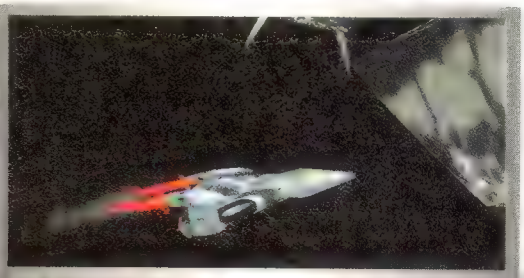
The alien ships in *Wing Commander: Prophecy* are indeed beautiful. They are the product of Syd Mead, the conceptual designer responsible for the look of *Blade Runner*, *Tron*, and *Aliens*. David Downing, the game's producer, says that the design was something Mead was eager to do. "He's been pigeon-holed as a designer of human objects: cars, ships, buildings. He's always wanted to play in an alien palette, but he hasn't been given that opportunity. We sat with him and explained what we were looking for in our aliens. We wanted them to be as comfortable in space as fish are in the ocean, for them to be at one with their environment, so they'd be difficult to fight in a space combat scenario." Downing explains how the alien ships also use swarming techniques that give them a completely different dynamic when they fight in groups.

"The look we've got is really crustacean at its basic level," says Mark Vearrier, the art director, "There's an insect quality, an aquatic quality. There's the feel that they've got these ships that are either grown like coral or perhaps they're the desiccated remains of some other alien race that they've inhabited and used as ships."

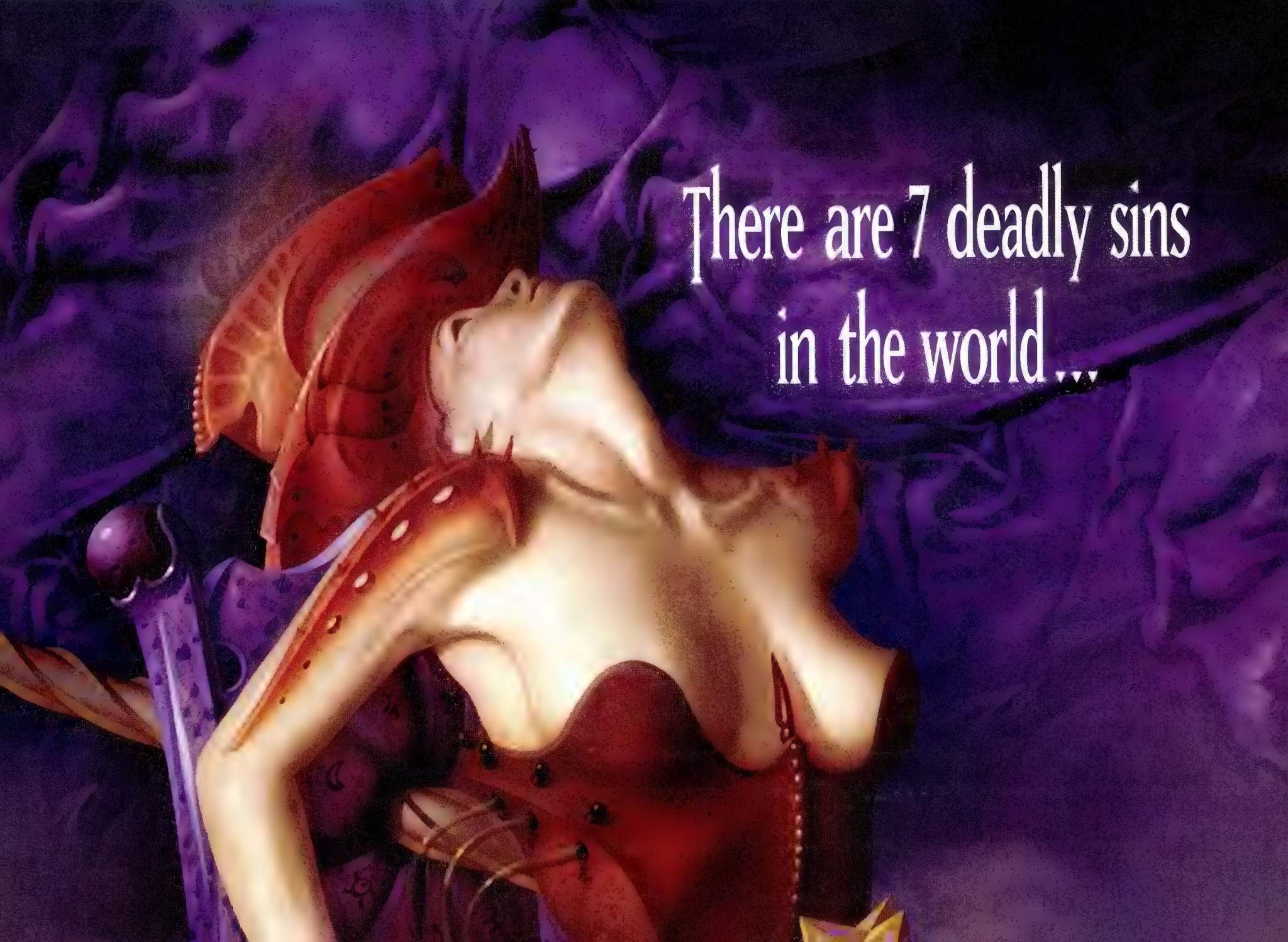
The team is pretty tight-lipped about the alien race. "What really jazzes you is the surprise," says Roan, "I hate to see the trailer before I go in to a movie. I want to go in fresh. The same thing here. Besides, the tone of this game is a sort of mystery. No one really knows what's going on. These aliens just appear while you're on a routine patrol and you have to unravel the story. People are scrambling to figure out what's happening, where these aliens are moving, what they're after, and who they are." In fact, *Prophecy* is just the first in a three-story arc; the name of the aliens isn't even revealed until later in the trilogy.

Balance

Almost everyone on the team had something to say about reestablishing a balance between cinematics and gameplay, a balance that tilted toward the former in the last two *Wing Commander* games. "The movie was the primary element in *Wing Commander IV*," says Nakamoto, "We've heard all the criticisms and the team is focused on getting back to gameplay. The movies are now more a support feature than anything else." Roan uses a more colorful analogy: "We want to make sure the movies are treated as any other color in our palette. Instead of concentrating on just this color or that color, we want to use



The new Vision Engine is faster and allows for lots of special effects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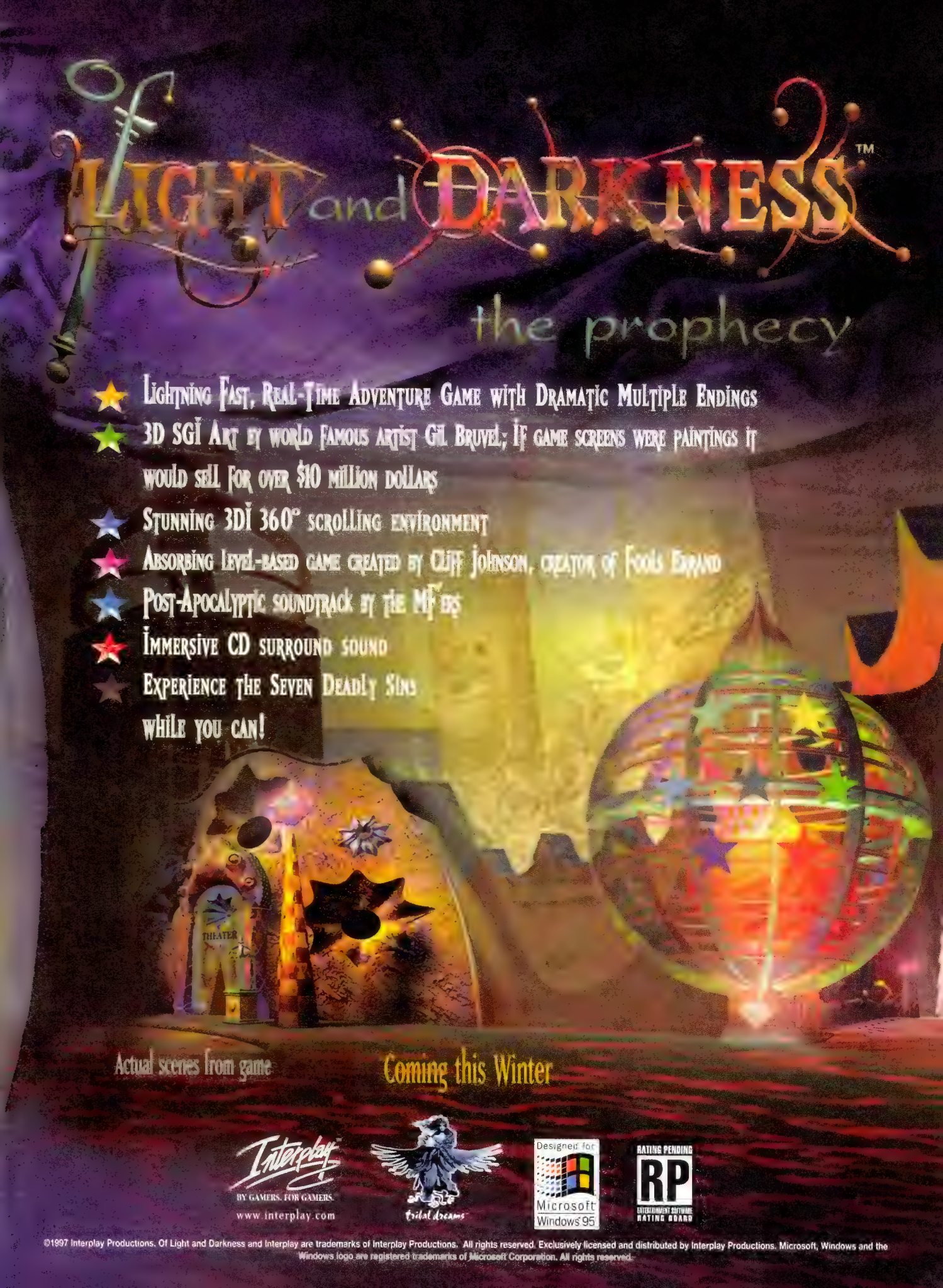
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Syd Mead's aliens are amazing creations, looking both organic and mechanical

it paint a large, epic *Wing Commander* story."

Downing leans forward on his arms and explains how they'll paint this epic with more balance. "We've made a greater attempt to blur the line between movie and game to where they're much more integrated. A lot of the bits and pieces of the story are presented in the cockpit. Conversely, we've taken the game into the game-flow rooms: for example, the mission briefing is actually the game engine rather than a scripted 3D animation. We're really trying to blend elements together to make a whole experience rather than watch a movie, then fly a mission, then watch a movie, then fly a mission."

Structure

The mission structure of the game recalls the first *Wing Commander*, in which you have squadrons with a single ship type. As you're promoted, you move into a different squadrons with a different ships. "You can't just play through the whole game with your favorite ship," says Roan, "In the past, we went to all the trouble of making all these different fighters available and everyone always picked the best one and ignored the others. But you're not the admiral anymore."

Rather, *Wing Commander: Prophecy* introduces a new player character through which to tell its story. Adam Foshko, the creative producer, was also the director of the game's two week film shoot in Burbank. Of the story, he says, "I want something greater, which requires laying down the basis of a new culture, which we've only seen the merest hint of in this game. It's much deeper, much broader. I also want to create more of a feeling of dread by not really showing what's out there. I'm more interested in creating a situation that would rely on fear and uncertainty in the pit of your stomach. It's a much greater tool for me as a storyteller to play with things like fear and anxiety and uncertainty."

Foshko talks about the evolution of the characters in *Prophecy*, sounding very much like a director. Although Mark Hamill's Colonel Blair is no longer the player character, he is present as a sort of mentor during the game. "We gave him a lot more meat in this story; different things happen to him. His range widens in this one." Of Tom Wilson's Maniac, Foshko says, "I wanted to see more dimension to Maniac. We've been watching him do the bluster thing, but I wanted to see what would happen if you put him in a real position of loss." Foshko manages to keep a straight face when he talks about former adult film actress Ginger Lynn Allen's return as Coriolis. "I wanted her back because I felt that our industry suffers from poorly drawn female characters. I wanted to see a change in that, to take off a bit of the comic book edge."

Gameplay

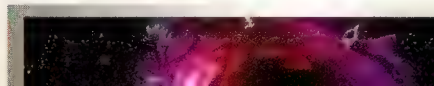
But unlike Chris Roberts, Foshko seems to have a very clear sense of balance. "This is not a stand-alone film," he says, "You take two elements and you grow them together. They intertwine and create a whole new experience." As for the other element, the gameplay, months of work have been put into making it smoother. Weapon changes are clearly indicated by changing reticles and the HUD's are cleaned up by having non-persistent displays that time out when they're not needed. Previously elaborate functions like shield and energy distribution are now performed by tapping a key and quickly arranging a schematic with a flick of the joystick.

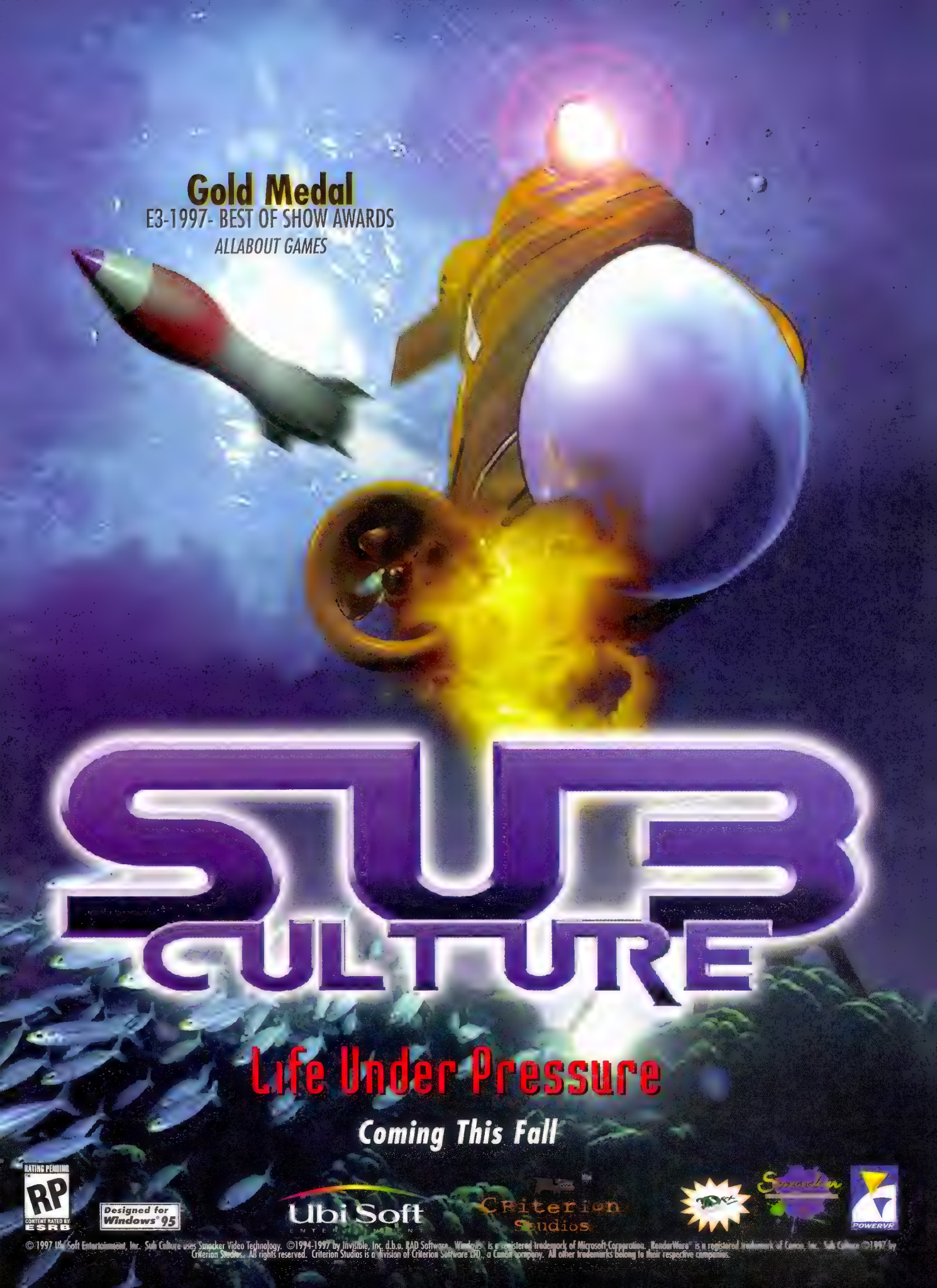
"The first time I sat down with *X-Wing*, I hit F1 and saw three thousand keys," recalls Roan, "I was kind of intimidated by that. I think you should really be able to play a game with just seven keys if you want. You shouldn't have to memorize a thousand keys. We want to make sure you have full access to most of the game's functionality with those seven keys."

Extra complexity, however, is being added to the flight model to make combat more dynamic. "We're taking into account rotational inertia and acceleration and things of that nature," says Roan, "so it doesn't feel like you're flying a desk, like it has in the past. You won't just turn and stop; you'll slide a little to the left and right and you can do a true afterburner slide. We can do thrust vectoring, too, which gives the ships a completely different feel." The Vampire, for instance, sports rotating thrusters on either wing, giving it a tighter looping ability, whereas the Wasp has a turret-like engine that gives it a tighter lateral turn. Several new weapons will be introduced as well, but no one's talking. Suffice to say that it looks as if the Confederation might be taking advantage of "otherworldly" technologies.

Finally, *Wing Commander: Prophecy* won't be over once you've finished the game. "Being in a game company for so long, we've been playing multiplayer games for about five years." says Roan," From playing so much, you get a feel for all the types of scenarios out there. We've identified about eight of those scenarios, deathmatch, capture the flag, and all that, and we want to offer those to the player."

"We want to draw on the history and the richness of the other *Wing Commanders*, but this is our opportunity to create the type of game we wanted to make in the past," Downing says, "There's always a balance between the history of *Wing Commander* and the future of *Wing Commander* and we're trying to relate those as best we can. But we want to take this game and have it become the pivotal point at which we transition from the old *Wing Commander* to the *new Wing Commander*." To paraphrase: *Wing Commander* is dead, long live *Wing Commander*. –*Tom Chick* ■





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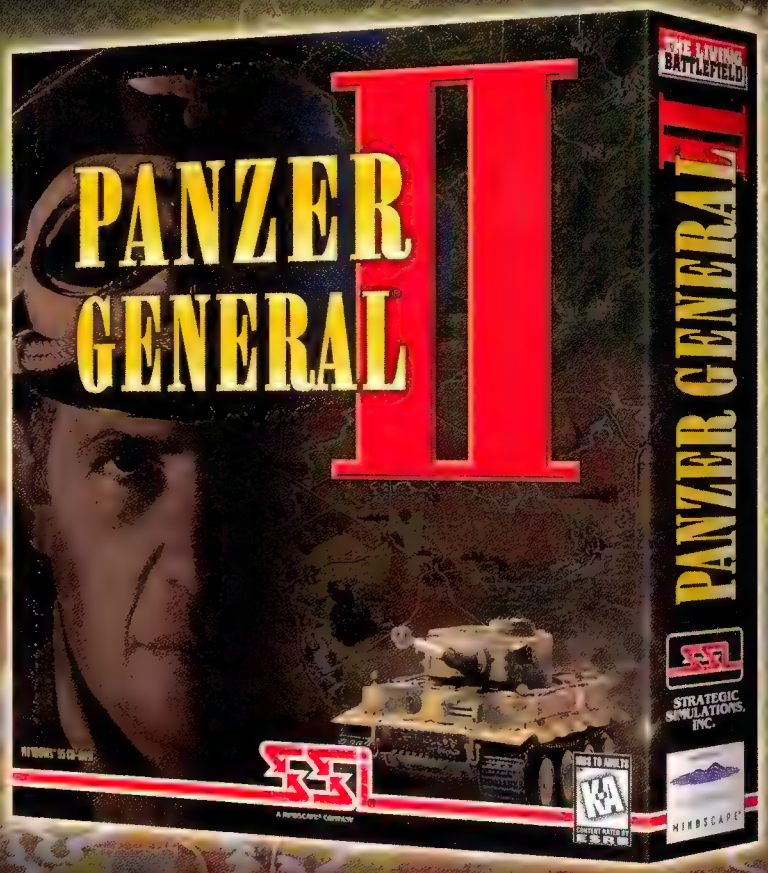

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EAST FRONT

Campaigning through Russia

TalonSoft • Windows 95

T-34s – trouble for the Germans. The on-screen dialog box represents TalonSoft's move towards a customized interface

City fights – some of the most vicious combat around

The East Front during World War II. Considered by many wargamers one of the richest areas for interesting gaming topics, it is one that TalonSoft, a top dog in computer wargaming, has not visited before. Indeed, their *Battleground* series (up to eight titles with *Prelude to Waterloo*, which should be out around the time you read this) has focused almost exclusively on 19th century warfare, with *Ardennes* (and its remake, *Bulge*) the only Word War II game the company has released. Aiming to change this (and thereby deflect the criticism of "rehash" leveled against the *Battleground* games – see the sidebar), the first title in their new *Campaign* series visits this vast wargame arena in a game called, simply enough, *East Front*.

The campaign trail

The fact that the series is called *Campaign* tells you immediately that games based on this new engine are going to be different from the *Battleground* titles. Whereas those games largely revolved around one battle (with maybe a couple of smaller side battles), gamed out in extreme detail, games of the *Campaign* system will stretch out over many battles while maintaining a level of detail almost as extreme (at least graphically; in the game "guts" things may actually be *more* detailed).

East Front covers most of the action across the breadth of the East Front from 1941 through 1945 (excluding Finland and activities of the Axis minor countries). While hexes represent 250 meters and individual units platoons, the actions covered could *theoretically* be as large as your RAM and hard-drive space would allow; if you had the hardware, you could model up to the Army level; realistically, however, scenarios will rarely be larger than brigade or division level. The game will ship with a wide selection of prebuilt scenarios (40+), many designed by some of the biggest names in the wargame community: James Dunnigan, Richard Berg, and Mark Baldwin, just to name a few.

While scenarios are nice, the core of the title will be the various campaigns. Roughly following the areas encompassed by Army Groups North, Center, and South, these will be linked series of randomized missions (there are eleven types of missions, including meeting engagements, defenses, and delaying actions). You pick the level you want to play at; the higher your rank, the more units you'll have under your control. You will be offered promotions (assuming you do well), but you can turn them down if you want to keep your game load small.

While random, the terrain in each battle you fight will correspond roughly to that of the general area you are in; if, strategically, you're on the steppes don't expect any mountain scenarios. The campaigns will roughly follow the historic course of the war; even if you win a brilliant tactical victory you might still face a defensive situation the next time around if the rest of your side was in retreat. The campaign plays out in one week increments, and you'll average about two battles per month (sometimes more, sometimes less; never more than four, however).

Say you've exhausted all the included scenarios but don't feel like working through a campaign – what to do? Time to turn to either the random battle generator or the full scenario/map editor to come up with something new. If you're too busy to design your own, you can use the generator to whip together a scenario to your specifications (using either existing maps or new ones). For those who like to craft their own, however, the editor package sounds like it can't be beat. Build a map, grab units from the generic order of battle (OOB), and fine-tune them to the OOBs of specific units (despite standard templates, units were rarely organized identically), then place them juuuuust so on the map. Remember, there are no theoretical design limits to the system, so craft away (although the whole East Front gamed out in six minute increments at a platoon scale would take a very, very long time to play).

The battlefield

Once a battle is joined, you'll immediately notice this isn't a TalonSoft game like you've come to know them. With the move to Windows 95-only, TalonSoft is now free to customize the interface – the "wargame as a spreadsheet" look will be as gone as TalonSoft's art department can make it in the time available. Because of the move

An armored column advances along a road; what threats might the woods and village hold?

Engineering obstacles can really mess up an advance

Fighting in the depths of Stalingrad

to a hex-based tiling system, the graphics may not be quite up to the standards of the hand-crafted (but inflexible) maps of the *Battleground* games, although this remains to be seen as they are moving the engine to 16 bit color and will be adding plenty of animation. The tile system also lets them flip the map 180 degrees, giving gamers a different perspective on the battlefield.

While still turn-based, *East Front* won't have the plethora of phases that existed in the *Battleground* games. Instead, TalonSoft President Jim Rose likens the system to that in *X-COM* (a game he quite obviously admires): units have actions points which they expend as they move, fire, or do other activities. They can save action points for use during the enemy turn (for automated reaction fire), or they can burn them all at once. The system will make for much faster games (even in play-by-e-mail), something that's necessary with the game's six-minute turns.

The game will ship with over 300 unit types (including flights of aircraft), and in the campaign the equipment in units will be upgraded and their organizations adjusted as they were historically. Leaders and HQs from the battalion level on up will be represented explicitly on the battlefield, and the command relationships should be better represented than they have been in previous TalonSoft games.

Multiplay is another big component, although it hadn't been merged into the build we got to see. Current plans call for up to 16 players with up to eight on a side; exactly how the teams will work is as yet unclear.

After-action report

An ambitious project, *East Front* is a game that the folks at TalonSoft are obviously dedicated to. The first game in both a new series and a new publishing approach (see sidebar), its reception by wargamers is important if not critical to the company; while it seems like they've included facets that will please both the *grognard* wargamer and those newer to the hobby, only time on the *Campaign* trail will tell if they've succeeded. –*Scott Udell*

TalonSoft to move out in '98

Despite its relative prominence in the computer wargaming field, TalonSoft is not a large company, consisting of only about a dozen in-house employees, some outside contract programmers, and (just recently) two separate development teams (one a single person, developer Norm Koger). Despite this, in the two years since they released their first game, *Ardennes*, they've published some nine games. They've been able to achieve this rate by leveraging their *Battleground* engine for most of the titles (even *Age of Sail*, their first game with a "new" engine, shares some 30% of its code with the old series). While not an uncommon practice in the industry (look at *Doom* and its ilk), it has led some to gripe that the games all feel the same, just the same old thing dressed up in new battle clothing. Good or bad depends on the individual (some like a reliable interface, and TalonSoft has done the unusual in retrofitting all improvements in the engine to older titles).

Even so, with *East Front* TalonSoft is pushing a new approach that they'll be pursing in 1998 and beyond. Instead of producing a large number of games based on one engine, they'll be focusing on fewer games for more engines. *Battleground* will be retired (although it might be remade on down the line; the planned *Battleground: Sinai/Middle East* has been dropped and the battles will be covered into a second Koger *Operational Art* title), and 1998 should see only one or two more *Campaign*-engined games (*West Front*, releasing in the Fall, and maybe *'Nam*) and *Age of Ironclads*, which has been pushed back to the Summer of '98 in order to convert it to full 32-bit code (*Prelude to Waterloo* will be the last TalonSoft title that will run under Windows 3.1). Add-on discs will be used to flesh out the time between the release of major titles in a series (the first quarter of '98 should see a pack for *East Front* that may include the Winter War and some of the Minor Countries).

While each series may get fewer games, TalonSoft has plans for several new product lines. They've already announced that Norm Koger (designer of titles like *Conflict: Middle East*, *Wargame Construction Set II: Tanks!*, and *Age of Rifles*) is working on a new operational-scale engine. The first game will cover battles from WW II through (perhaps) the Korean War (and some hypothetical wars, too). We got a brief glimpse at a work-in-progress, and Koger fans should be pleased (especially those who remember his older, operational-scale titles). One other wargame engine is being considered, but TalonSoft is keeping mum about details.

While wargames are their current bread-and-butter, general strategy games sell more, so TalonSoft plans on releasing games based on yet two more engines. The first title, called *Clanwars*, sits on a real-time strategy game engine, and is TalonSoft's first game from an outside development team. Described by TalonSoft president Jim Rose as "Mad Max meets *Car Wars*," they're not scheduling its release until next Spring so they can avoid the rush of Clone & Conquer games scheduled for the Holidays. The other strategy engine will first beseen in public in the form of a fantasy game that Rose says (rather mysteriously) will be both turn-based and real-time.

While a very ambitious schedule, TalonSoft has proven that it can deliver the goods. Whether this new strategy of fewer titles across more engines will work for them is obviously still unclear, but continued strong sales of their only non-*Battleground* game to date, *Age of Sail*, has the "TalonSoft Team" hopeful.

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GameSlice Weekly

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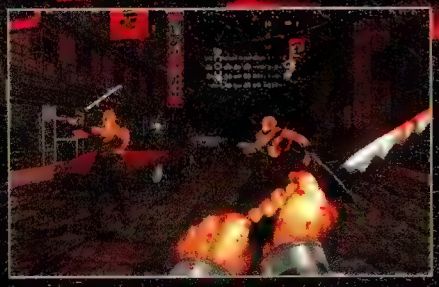

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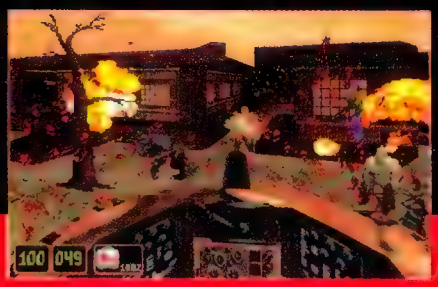

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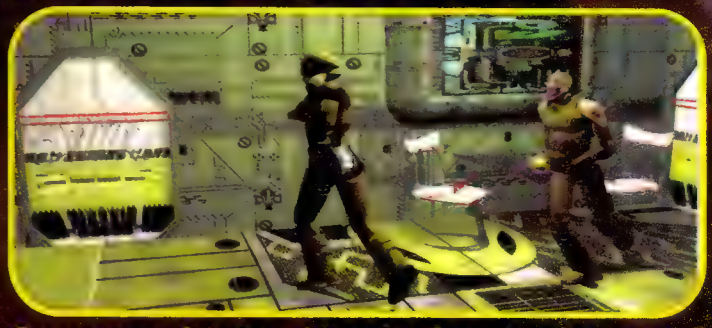
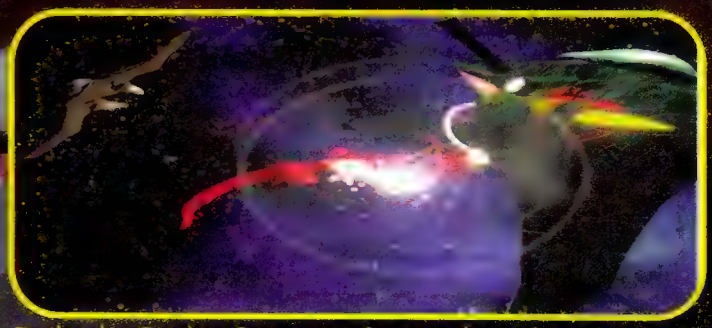


Consequence of Action - It's not just if you win or lose, or even how you play the game. Everything you do determines how the game is even played at all.



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LONGBOW 2

A new member of the rotary-wing club

Jane's Combat Simulations • Windows 95

No, it's not a cutscene: 3D acceleration gives Longbow 2 all these impressive visual effects

Air-to-air is one of the capabilities added to the AH-64D

Examples of the new lighting effects

Andy Hollis is a textbook case of the compulsive perfectionist. He'll repeatedly say that if his team can't get a feature 100% right, they won't include it. Witness his last title, *AH-64D Longbow*, a paragon among flight simulations, regarded by many as near-perfect when it was released. But the expansion disk that followed wasn't content to merely add a campaign; it added new features that many of us players had never even thought of.

Ladies and gentlemen, the game

Hollis is the executive producer for *Longbow 2*, which models the US Army's AH-64D, an Apache attack helicopter stuffed with sophisticated avionics and sporting a multi-million dollar mast-mounted radar dome. "Our core vision for *Longbow 2* is the 'integrated digital battlefield of tomorrow,'" Hollis says, deepening his voice for the military-speak, "Longbows and Kiowas and Blackhawks all integrated together... sharing targeting information and commands back and forth. That's really the way we want gameplay to work for *Longbow 2*, allowing that level of functionality." Hollis is very clearly excited about the game, and he grins mischievously, as if he has a secret. In fact, on several occasions, he'll ask me to turn off my tape recorder so he can share something off the record about how they've developed, programmed, and tested the game.

The title *Longbow 2* is perhaps a misnomer, since the spotlight is now shared with the UH-60 Blackhawk, a lumbering transport, and the OH-58D Kiowa (rhymes with "Iowa"), a nimble sharp-eyed scout. The common thread that binds *Longbow 2's* rotary-wing trinity is the Tactical Situation Display (TSD), a multi-function display (MFD) page that integrates battlefield information from all friendly sources. The Blackhawk features a single MFD, essentially kludged onto its sprawling analog dashboard, that lets it download TSD information. Flying a Blackhawk mission requires sticking close to your escorts and keeping your head down, which doesn't exactly sound exciting. But Hollis explains that the challenge is in the flying (although he describes the implementation of the Blackhawk's door-mounted 7.62mm machine gun as "*Doom* in a helicopter"). The Blackhawk handles like a whale in a hang-glider and it isn't exactly state-of-the-art, so pilots will have their hands full, particularly during the quick landings and takeoffs required in hostile territory.

"In *Longbow*, players kept complaining when the Blackhawks they were escorting got shot up, so we're going to let them see if they can do any better," says Will McBurnett, *Longbow 2's* producer. I had already "met" McBurnett in *Longbow's* "failed mission" cutscene: he played the sergeant who chews out the blond surfer-dude pilot. Even on digitized video, I wasn't fooled for a second that McBurnett is anything but a good-natured teddy bear. He has an easy laugh and an earnest sincerity that nicely balances Hollis' impish glee.

The Kiowa is undoubtedly faster and more maneuverable, but it can't carry the payload or handle the punishment that the Longbow can. What it can do is see far and wide without exposing itself.

Whereas the Longbow's radar is above its rotor, the Target Acquisition and Designation System (TADS) that it needs to get a clear look at the battlefield is mounted on its nose, requiring it to pop up and expose itself. But both the Kiowa's radar and TADS are mounted above the rotor, so it never has to come out of hiding. "They can sit behind the treeline and look around without anyone knowing they're there. These guys are made to go way behind enemy lines," McBurnett says. The 2-seater Kiowa features an MFD for each side-by-side position and a shared central MFD with a moving digital map.

Additive sequel

In response to whether the AH-64D will be modified, McBurnett says, "Everything that worked in *Longbow* will work in *Longbow 2*. Anything we've done is additive." Among the additions are new wingmen communications to take into account the different helicopter types, a smoke rocket used for evasion or marking target areas, "smarter" air and artillery strikes, and perhaps an improved target filtering routine. Ever cautious about counting chickens before they're hatched, Hollis is reluctant to mention anything that hasn't been locked in. "Are we sure that's going to be in there yet?" Hollis asks on more than one occasion when McBurnett mentions a new feature or modification.

A far flashier modification to the original Longbow is the support of 3D acceleration hardware for more fluid and detailed terrain and objects. Polygon counts, terrain resolution, and frame rates have soared. Special features like a virtual cockpit are now available, as well as a veritable orgy of lighting effects. McBurnett's face lights up like the back of a Hellfire as he describes them: "We have a real-time dynamic lighting system with multicolored light of any intensity. Both ambient light from the sun and point sources of varying degrees of intensity light the aircraft, smoke, and terrain. For instance, when you fire a rocket, you see it light the terrain and the aircraft. And then when you fire the next rocket, it will light all that stuff and the smoke from the previous rocket. At night, you can look over the battlefield and even four or five kilometers away, you can see flashes of light and smoke going up in the dark. We went all out."

The nighttime effects are reminiscent of what you might see in sci-fi shooters. But there are far subtler effects as well, such as the lens flare, the cockpit's reddish glow, or the way sunlight flickers as it shines through the spinning rotors. Even the absence of light through the Pilot's Night Vision Sensor (PNVS) is spruced up, with a fading effect around the edges as if the viewer were looking through a monocle.

"With hardware acceleration, a lot of this was really straightforward, whereas in the past we just haven't had the performance from a software-only solution," Hollis says, "And now that we do, it's like a kid in a candy store." But he hasn't forgotten the players without the latest hardware. Hollis insists that even baseline Pentiums will enjoy a performance comparable to the original Longbow once certain effects are turned off.

Dynamic campaign

Even more so than the new helicopters and graphics, *Longbow 2's* most noteworthy addition is the dynamic campaign. Hollis describes it as follows: "It's a campaign with a front line that moves depending on who controls the ground, which is defined by ground forces. Your job is to aid and abet the transfer of ground to your ground forces. Before each mission, the mission generator goes out and looks at the whole situation and then it builds up a list of targets and prioritizes them. It also looks at strike targets on your side that you might want to defend and it builds up a list of things you might want to try to investigate within enemy territory. It will generate a series of missions based on all these things."

So every game day, the player is presented with a list of four missions. He also has four Forward Arming and Refueling Points (FARP's), but each one has only limited resources: "We're also doing resource management on air assets and weapons. That's allowed us to encourage players to use different weapons. In the past, with the original *Longbow*, it was easy to load up on Radar Hellfires and just blow everybody away. Now you'll have encouragement not to do that: i.e. 'Gee, there aren't any....'"

The player chooses a pair of helicopters from each FARP, assigns them one of the missions, and then proceeds to plan all four missions, deciding when, where, and how to fly (one of the missions he'll fly; the computer takes over the others unless it's a multiplayer game). And here's where *Longbow 2's* biggest surprise comes in, thanks to Clark Janes, a recent Skunkworks employee who Andy met on the flight sim newsgroup. Janes has crafted what appears be one of the finest mission planners this side of DI's *Tornado*. It's clearly laid out, with all the features we've come to expect, as well as some we've grown accustomed to doing without. First, it has a terrain profiler that allows you to interact thoroughly with the terrain. You can drag a line between two points to call up a detailed cross section of the elevations along that line and then you can plot a waypoint on the cross section. This will allow you to carefully tuck flights into ravines and crevices, or to cruise just under the crest of a ridge.

The second long-overlooked feature is the timing information that calculates when a unit will be at a given point based on its assigned speed. This allows precise times on target for coordinated attacks. A loiter waypoint command with a duration setting makes it easy to arrange battlefield rendezvous and a clever "Rehearse" button sets all the units in motion on the map, so you can watch their progress relative to each other. Anyone who played *Tornado* remembers what a rush it was to approach your target at the same time as three other flights from different directions; the timing was so meticulous that a few seconds' error could lead to a collision right over the target.

Longbow 2 has an Iran/Iraq/Azerbaijan campaign and a National Training Center wargames campaign set in Fort Irwin, California, fought against American equipment "playing" the Russians. The campaigns and single missions all work as mutliplayer games through TCP/IP connections or LANs. The host or "master" sets all the game options, assigning the other players to missions and helicopters, at which point they configure their own flights. Players can use this set up to fly head-to-head in Fort Irwin or cooperatively against the Russians in Azerbaijan, in any combination of positions within the same helicopter or in different types of helicopters.

"You may set out to create a great game," Hollis says, "But if you set out to create a great team, you'll get a great game. You can have the greatest idea in the world and a mediocre team, and you'll get, at best, a mediocre product. But if you take even a mediocre idea and give it to a kick-ass team, then you'll get a kick-ass product." Hollis doesn't elaborate on what you'll get when you take a kick-ass idea and give it to a kick-ass team. Given the track record of Longbow and Skunkworks, it looks as if we'll find out this fall when *Longbow 2* is released. –*Tom Chick*

Just a few words from
the *original creators*
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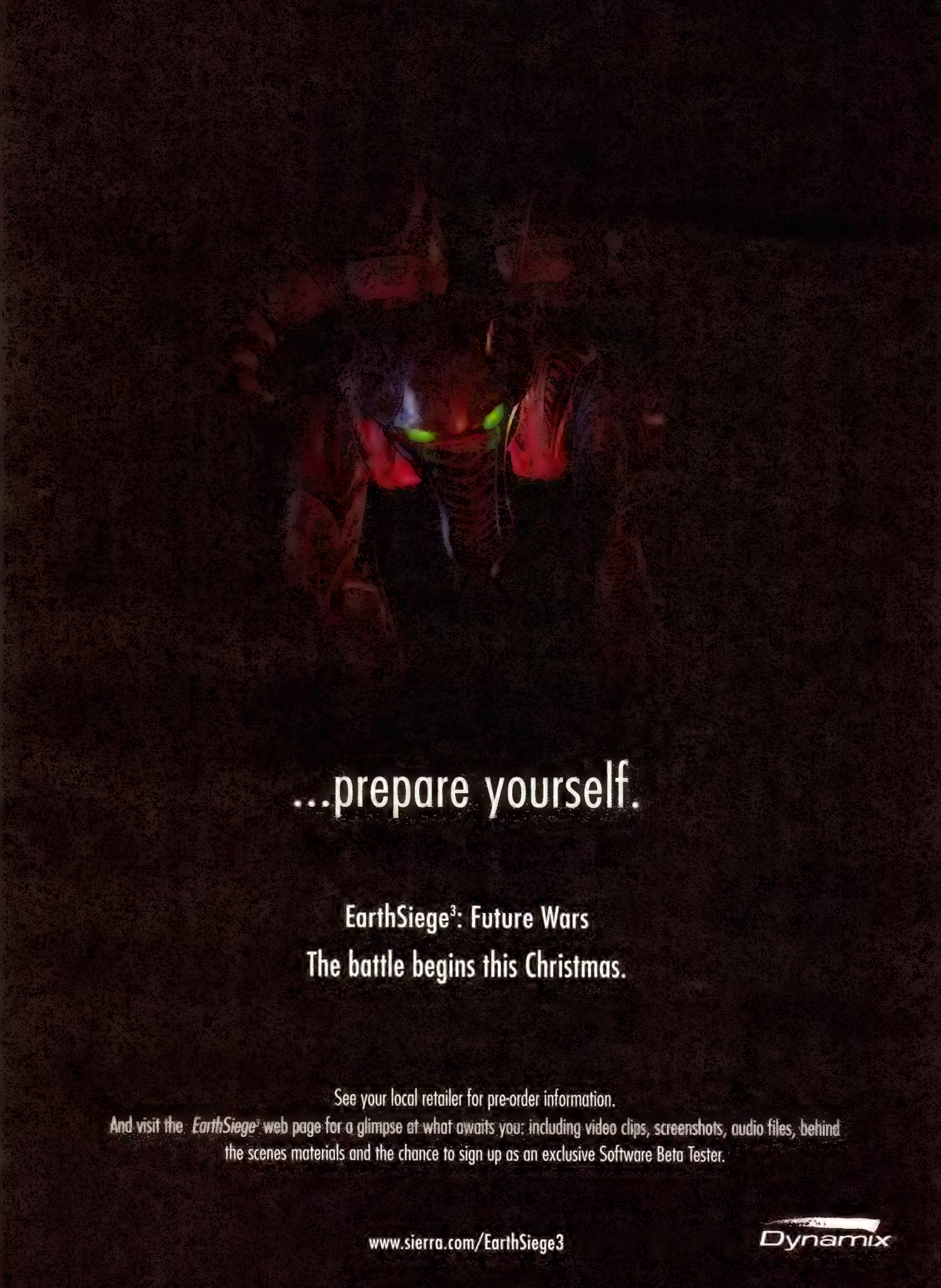
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Dynamix

M1 Tank Platoon II

Old armor games never die

M1s taking fire in the desert ▶

The grand-daddy of armor sims (well, okay, there was *Battle Zone*, but that hardly counts now, does it?), *M1 Tank Platoon* is beginning to show its age; low-res, low-color VGA (assuming you weren't running it on something like an Amiga), it's surprising how long its "legs" have been in this era of graphics flash. That its popularity has continued for so long is a testament to both the game's design and the fact that nothing else has really come out that can challenge it. While the basic design is still strong, challengers are appearing; what's a publisher to do to maintain the "family" hold on the title of king of the tank sim? Release a sequel, of course – a full overhaul of the engine (to rejuvenate the line so it can compete in modern times) that nonetheless aims to keep the core gameplay the same.

Players familiar with the original design should feel right at home even as they marvel over the already impressive graphics improvements (the game's not even in alpha as of this writing). As before you'll directly control a platoon of four tanks, able to jump between them to various positions, and indirectly command various support

◀ Sure, they're easy to take out, but the M2s (and the M3 scout variant) bite back in a most unpleasant way

A Russian Hind hiding below a treeline– something even an M1 has to respect ▼

platoons like mechanized infantry, scouts, artillery, helicopters, and close air support aircraft (Producer and Lead Programmer Scott Spanberg, who worked on the original game, says it's very unlikely you'll ever get a second platoon of M1s as the tanks are so powerful eight of them would unbalance most scenarios).

Unlike the original, *M1 Tank Platoon II* models the latest M1 variant, the -A2, complete with its upgraded electronics systems (specifically, the IVIS – Intervehicular Information System – and the CITV – Commander's Independent Thermal Viewer). Considered "force modifiers," these two systems should help the M1 perform even better on future battlefields than it did during Desert Storm. While all four crew members are still modeled, the gamer will only be able to enter the gunner and tank commander positions (inside a 3D "virtual cockpit" view that is not yet implemented), but the lack of a driver position shouldn't be a problem as the AI drivers are now much more intelligent (they can even successfully assume a hull-down position, and do so automatically).

While a "realistic" IVIS screen will be modeled in the "cockpit" view, gamers can access a full-screen map from which they can issue orders to the platoons under their control. A concession to playability that doesn't exist in real tanks, it makes up for both the constricted "situational awareness" a simulated tank commander has and the lack of easily represented radio communications that commander would have with his crew, platoon, and supporting units. While similar to the map view in the older game, it is more powerful. Commanders can now set up a battle plan (complete with detailed waypoint instructions) before the battle and adjust it as called for by the situation, adding a level of planning realism the original didn't have.

The game will feature a selection of pre-made scenarios as well as a random battle generator, a full set of training missions, and four or five campaigns in places like Libya and Saudi Arabia. Players can command either an Army or Marine platoon (they assume that, in the near future, the Marines will be upgraded to M1-A2s). Because of the Marines, the number of vehicles modeled will grow over the original; some of the friendly vehicles you'll encounter include M2 IFVs and M3 scouts, LAV-25s, ITOWs, various Humvees, M109s and M113s, and Apaches and A-10s. Enemy vehicles may include T-80s and -90s; BRDM, BMP, and BTR variants; Tunguskas; Hinds and Frogfoots, and others (the list for both friendly and enemy vehicles is larger than this but still in flux).

The graphics engine, even at this stage, is already impressive; even on a 90MHz Pentium (Spanberg's development machine) the frame rate is good with effects like haze turned on. 3D support is still under consideration; while they have a prototype of the engine running on a 3Dfx-equiped card, the memory constraints of such cards is a problem, as are API programming time constraints. MicroProse plans on multiplayer, but specifics have yet to be worked out.

Perhaps the aim of *M1 Tank Platoon II* is best summarized in this statement by Spanberg: "The whole goal on this is that we're a sequel; people liked the original [game] and we're trying to give them the original one updated. We're not going to do every feature [we could]… we're going to do the best we can with features we settled on." *–Scott Udell*

M1 Tank Platoon II • MicroProse • Windows 95

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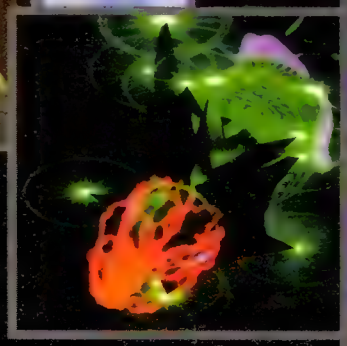

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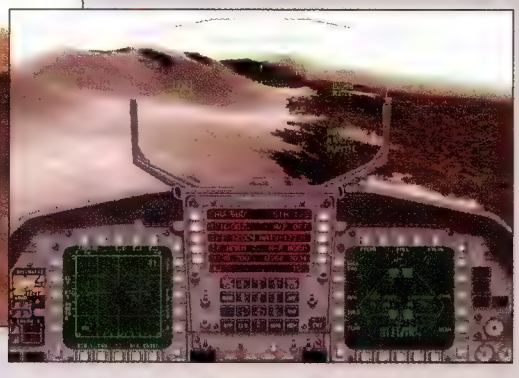
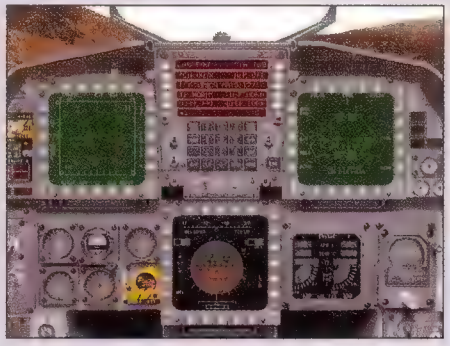


Strike Eagle redux F-15

The last simulation Andy Hollis completed before leaving MicroProse was *F-15 Strike Eagle III*. History is repeating itself now that he's assembled ten guys, many of them from the original *Strike Eagle* team, to develop a new F-15 sim under Jane's banner. Furthermore, they're working on it in Maryland, MicroProse's home turf.

Hollis admits *F-15* will feel familiar to players of the old game, mainly because they're both models of the same aircraft. Indeed, the cockpit view evokes a sense of déjà vu, especially the rear seat's distinctive row of MFD's. But this cockpit is a little different: "All the avionics work and all the buttons work," he says, demonstrating on the bevel buttons that surround the MFD's. "Other folks have done this, but here it works the way the real thing does." Hollis takes a huge binder down from his shelf and flips it open to a random page, showing a diagram of an F-15's autopilot routine. He shows how the corresponding display in the sim works exactly the same as he follows the procedure outlined in the binder.

"This is called a Dash Thirty Four," he holds up the photocopy of the instrumentation manual issued to F-15 pilots. "Freedom of Information Act," he says with a grin, anticipating the next question. Presuming that a real F-15 must be excruciatingly complicated, the obvious question is how much he toned it down. Not much, he insists. "The way they really do this makes it easy. It's a very straightforward and intuitive interface. Because when you're up there and people are shooting at you, you don't want to be reading through the manual," he hefts the Dash Thirty Four, "It's very much a point and click kind of interface."



He refers to the database the Air Force uses for its training sims, called Datcom, which contains information about their aircraft's flight models. "We have that flight model in this game. We've got access to it. We've also had real F-15 pilots get in and help us with the final tweaking." Since the Gulf War, a lot of new information about the F-15 is available, which the Jane's team has used extensively. They've also worked closely with a retired Lieutenant Colonel with ten years of experience flying F-15's.

The F-15 is an air-to-air fighter, but the E variant is a dual-role aircraft, designed to haul heavy ordnance, while still able to defend itself against air threats. On the detailed arming screen, Hollis demonstrates the wide variety of loadouts: iron and cluster bomb variants with different guidance systems, air-to-air missiles, mavericks, jammers, chaff dispensers, fuel tanks, nav pods, and targeting pods.

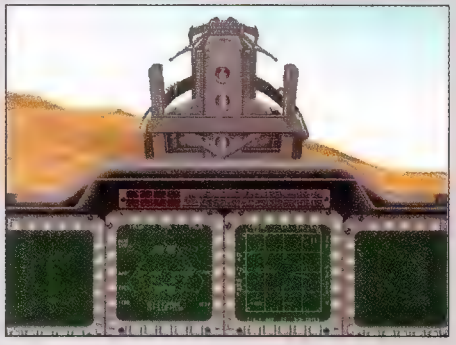
The F-15 is designed to fly low using terrain following radar. But shoulder-launched SAMS and AAA often force it into medium- and high-altitude ranges, which presents a graphics problem. "It's got to look really good up high (anybody can do that), but it's also got to look really good down low and it's got to go seamlessly together. Also, it's important that objects integrate well with the terrain. There's a lot of photorealistic terrain out there right now, and people are just plopping objects down that don't look like they belong." The graphics in F-15 live up nicely to Hollis' demand as he dives from 15,000 feet to 150 feet, flies over a POL yard and skims a mountain range. A fine grainy texture gives everything a consistent look, reminiscent of *Strike Eagle III*, and it should smooth out nicely as 3D accelerator support is implemented.

The sim will include nearly 3 million square miles of territory. Zooming the mission planner all the way out reveals a huge patch of the Middle East that encompasses Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Iran, where the player can participate in a historical Desert Storm campaign or a fictional war in Iran.

Hollis' description of the game structure implies something halfway between canned missions and a dynamic campaign. "We're doing resource management. Also, things that are dead stay dead, but they may regenerate over time. They may even regenerate partially. For instance, if you blow up a bridge, it may show up as a pontoon bridge a couple of missions later. A lot of that sort of detail gives it a very dynamic feel. We're keeping track of things: elements from several missions ago may have an effect on what actually happens down the line."

◀ The cockpit buttons will be interactive

Back seat drivers will feel right at home ▼



As a campaign progresses, the player will be promoted or demoted depending on performance, implying a branching structure of canned missions. "Yes, there is some branching going on, but you're not going to feel like it's branching at all. Things can come from different places at different times. They're not scripted per se." But the game is still composed of self-contained missions, as demonstrated by the included scenario builder. "This is exactly what's being used to create the missions within the game," Hollis says, demonstrating its flexibility and breadth.

F-15 will include multiplayer support, but without cooperative missions or front seat/back seat functionality for two players in the same plane. "The support we're committing to right now, on this day, is just the head-to-head stuff. We find that's what people play most," Hollis explains. But Hollis is notorious for keeping plans under wraps until they're thoroughly tested. You can bet if there's any practical way to expand *F-15*'s multiplayer capability, Hollis' Maryland team will be working on it. *-Tom Chick*

F-15 • Jane's Combat Simulations • Windows 95

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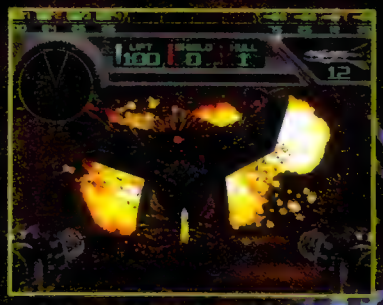

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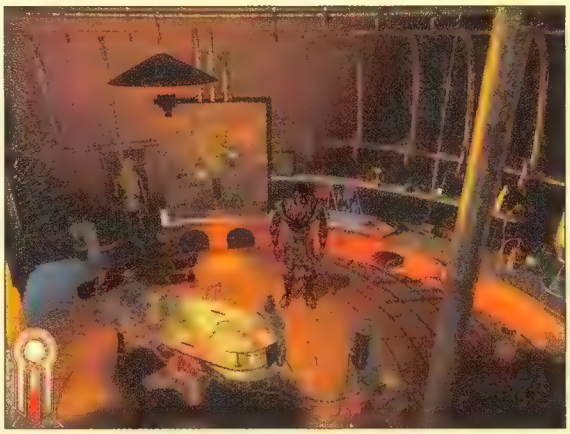
◀ A fountain in homage to the Great Sun God

Dark Earth

Rah, Rah, Ra…in Sparta?

Anybody have a light? So asked the denizens of the Earth after the Great Cataclysm, when the Great Candle Snuffer extinguished the Light on the Great Planet, and the cities were turned to dust, and floods and earthquakes and raining fire and avalanches and tsunamis and cyclones and volcanoes turned the world into oatmeal. It was unpleasant. A group of beings were spared, however (must've been major contributors to the Great Sun God's campaign fund), and when the chaos abated, they set forth to find a better place where there would be light – a place that they could call home and from which they could begin a new life in worship of the Great Sun God (cousin of Egypt's Ra, whose fault all of this seems to have been in the first place). They were called the Initiates, members of an *only*-world-order (Sigma Delta Psun-God), whose purpose would be to bring life once again to the Earth, and to live in peace, harmony, and above all, Light.

Their journey through the Darklands lasted seemingly forever, until (many bunions later) they came upon a land blessed by the Light of the Sun God – a Stallite that came to be known as Sparta, and there they built a city and casino, er, Temple dedicated to the Father of Light. Having finished their wandering, they got down to the real business of life (something involving pudding, no doubt) and things were proceeding well – until…something went wrong.

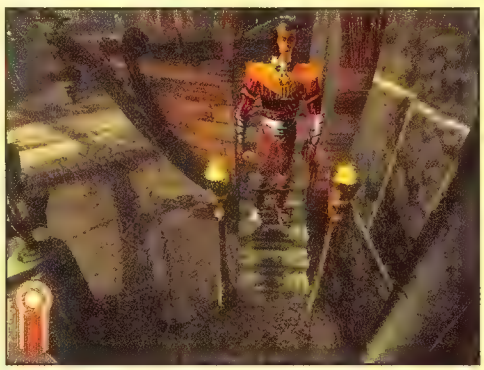


Dark Earth, developed by Kalisto, is a real-time action adventure that tells the story of Arkhan, a young man of Stallite Sparta. Although born to the Sunseers, the highest caste of the city's ruling theocracy, Arkhan is a regular guy, pony tail and all. Although belonging to an elitist caste is generally nothing to sneeze at, Arkhan deflates its high principals and becomes involved with Kalhi-the-scantily-clad, of the lower Scavenger caste. Arkhan then joins the Company of the Guardians of Fire, akin, perhaps, to becoming a state trooper. At the beginning of the game, during guard duty one day, Arkhan hears about a treacherous plot threatening to throw the land once again into Darkness. Soon thereafter, he is somehow "altered" by powers that cannot be identified. It is then up to the player to guide him in a race against time through trials tests and ordeals. As time passes, Arkhan is being transformed into something unrecognizable, monstrous and hideous (Fruity Pebbles?) and his only chance of survival is to reveal Sparta's past so that its people again may look toward the future.

The real-time environment greatly affects the story, since events continually evolve as Arkhan makes life choices. The choices may be further fine-tuned by choosing a particular mood of interaction. The moods appear as white, red or black as a bulb on top of the on-screen health meter (the usual thermometer-looking affair). Combat (when you're feeling a bit on the red side), is easily controlled and intuitive, as is the entire interface with full-screen inventory. Action and combat are keyboard controlled, but inventory and menu screens may also be accessed via the mouse driver. As of this writing, one may save a game only in the presence of a wall hanging that displays the symbol of Light. If this feature remains, the danger exists that experiencing the plot flow may become secondary to finding

Arkhan descending ▶

Arkhan transformed ▼

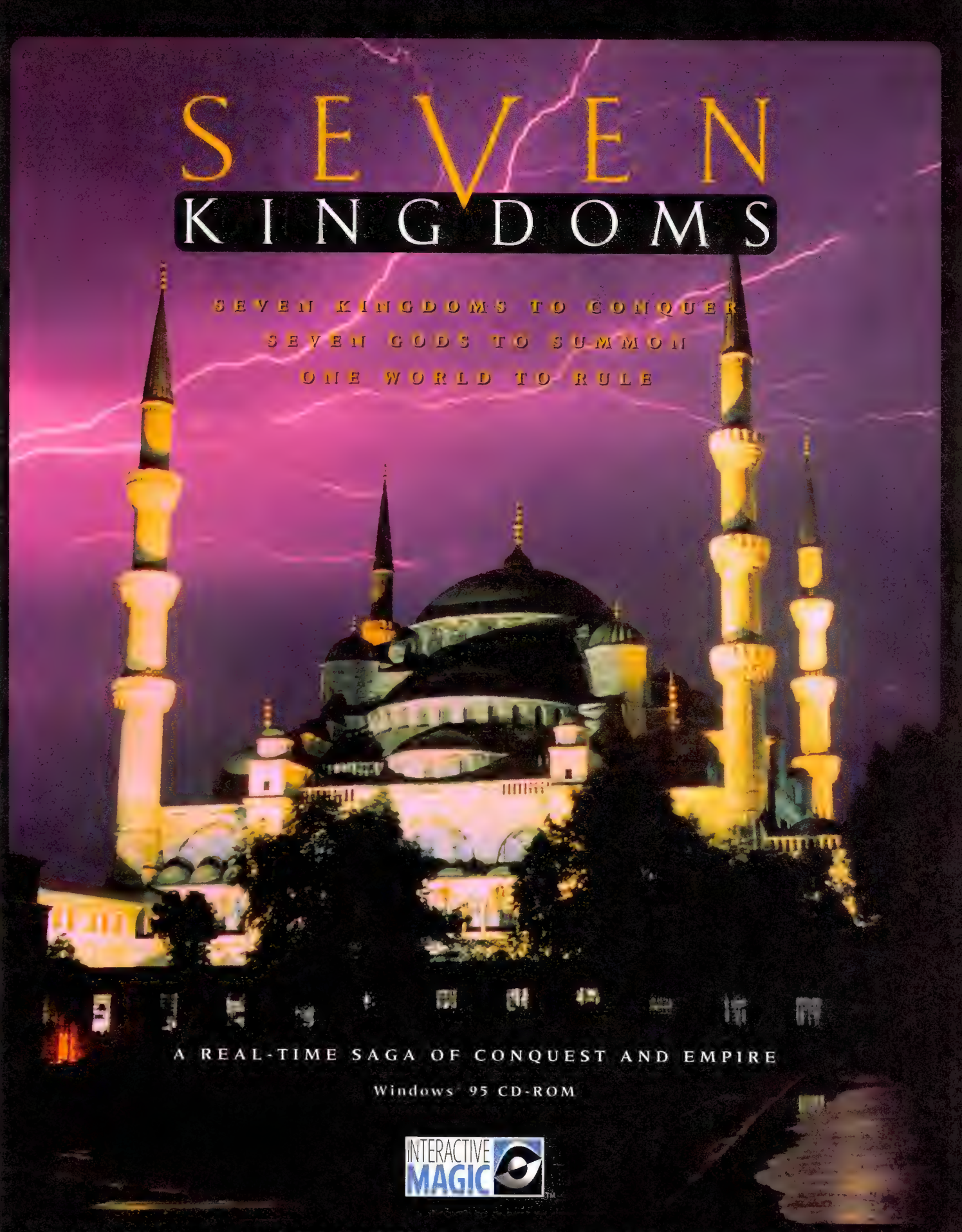


the next save spot. "Oops, better not try *that* now, not until I find the next save spot."

Two and a half years of toil have evolved artists' original two dimensional artwork into a three dimensional world, with more than 100 fully modeled characters with which to speak, fight or exchange stories, and over 45 minutes of cinematic cut scenes. Characters have been enhanced with motion-capture technology that resulted n more than 5,000 animations. The graphical 3-D engine looks super so far, with full range of movement and more than 250 pre-rendered locations. More than 800 sound effects, 50 minutes of interactive soundtrack music, and over four hours of spoken dialogue will fill your speakers, hence your ears, with carefully selected audio.

Dark Earth will appear at retailers this Fall, and you can meet it with matches, candles, torches, flashlights, lanterns and day-glo markers as you raise your hands à la Zelda Rubenstein, shouting "Go into the light, Carol Ann! … er, Arkhan!" *–Cindy Yans*

Dark Earth • Kalisto Entertainment • Windows 95



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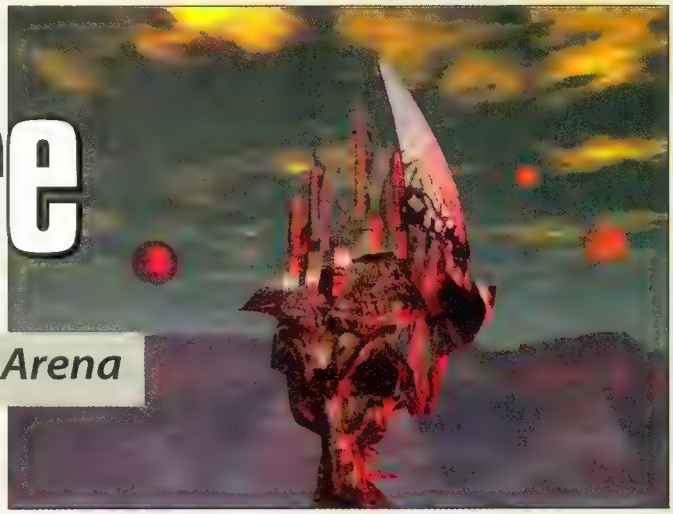
Battlespire

Bethesda steps into a whole new Arena



Atop a skull somewhere in a pocket universe ▶

First there was *Arena*. Then *Daggerfall*, the most highly anticipated role-playing game the public ever had the pleasure of waiting centuries for. And now, in the *Elder Scrolls* tradition, we have *Battlespire*, Bethesda Softworks' latest offering amidst the current dearth of traditional role-playing games. But is it traditional? Yes and no.

We were introduced to the land of Tamriel in earlier days, and the story of *Battlespire* is an attempt to explore its subsections in detail. Battlespire is located in a mana-enriched pocket universe, and is the testing ground for the Imperial Emperor's personal guards. Only upon proving oneself by overcoming the challenges of this place could one join the realm of the Emperor's elite war wizards. It is the age and times of *Arena*, and you, a hero (of course!) arrive at Battlespire only to find that you can no longer return to Tamriel. No one is alive, and you find that the Preceptors have been slaughtered, the libraries and vaults look like post-Rodney-King LA, and some pretty shady characters are lurking about. As you take them on, you learn that Mehrunes Dagon, a Daedra prince and his allied clans have take over Battlespire, and it's up to you to reclaim this citadel for all that is noble in the world.

▲ Shades of Armageddon

▶ Dungeon crawler

To do this, you will undergo seven challenges on your way to the top, and only upon their completion will you be able to confront Mehrunes Dagon and return to Tamriel. Players of *Daggerfall* (many of whom *still* haven't seen the game in its entirety) may be relieved to note that the *Battlespire* world is not as large at that of *Daggerfall*. But designers still anticipate a 40-plus hour experience to complete the game. Although this product is not a sequel, *The Elder Scrolls'* third chapter is currently in development.

At first glance, the game appears to be a first-person shooter clone, but not so – most of the role-playing elements you might expect are present here. The character creation system is based upon the point-balanced, very detailed system we saw in *Daggerfall*, and character development continues throughout the game as one acquires additional stats, skills, spells, weapons, equipment, and other advantages and disadvantages (such as bans on certain armor types or vulnerability to various types of magic). The Item Maker has been eighty-sixed, but the Spell Maker is still available and may be configured on the fly, although you will not be able to mix spell effects or adjust numbers (duration, damage, etc.). And happily, hot key assignments will put thunder and lightning at your fingertips.

This game will be level based, but there is really one other departure from everything that was familiar in *Daggerfall* that may make "the modern gamers" proffer their MasterCards this holiday season. (Yes, it's supposed to be here fourth-quarter, but after the *Daggerfall* delays, there are skeptics.) After having received much badgering from various sources, the developers decided to go multiplayer. Up to eight players will be able to play over a LAN or the Internet (using TCP/IP) in deathmatch, cooperative team play, and team vs. team play. The single player elements have been removed for deathmatch and team vs. team games.

The adorable XnGine is back, and although it is a full 3-D polygon based tool, they decided to use sprites instead. Why? A couple of reasons have been offered: first is the fact that they will have an easier time matching the detail quality of the creatures and NPC's and their surroundings; and secondly, it allows them more time to devote to the multiplayer capabilities and 3Dfx support. Bethesda states that this will be their last sprite-based product, since the day draws near that they will be implementing 3-D technology that will provide as detailed results.

Designer Julian Lefay says, "...what *Battlespire* has to offer is a level of depth in gameplay that most games do not offer. Fans of our *Elder Scrolls* series know that we make games with lots of meat on the bones..." And after *Daggerfall*, we certainly know they can supply the beef... it's the condiments we're interested in. *–Cindy Yans*

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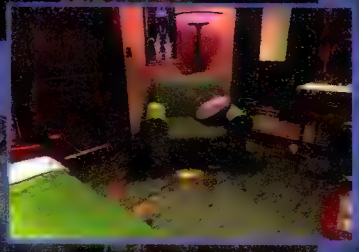
Black
Dahlia



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The Tone Rebellion

Reunite a world or lose it forever

A world shattered and a struggle against wrongness… the two key ingredients that form the base of the game called *The Tone Rebellion*. In lesser form, these ingredients also form the base of the real-world contest faced by the game's developer The Logic Factory, also creators of the controversial game *Ascendancy*.

Few gamers aren't aware of the controversy surround *Ascendancy*: an undeniably beautiful game that, unfortunately, was easy to beat (assuming you took the militaristic approach to winning, one of only several ways but the most popular); also, the game and the company have been haunted by an association with a hint book written by a reviewer of the game (a review that was positive, an opinion many hard-core gamers found questionable). Regarding the AI, The Logic Factory's Todd Templeman acknowledges that "with one more month of balancing we could have had a great game." He continues: "There's no such thing as perfect AI, especially in a computer game; if you're not going to put the resources IBM does in Deep Blue you're going to have to give the AI some advantage, and that's one thing that didn't happen in *Ascendency*." In both games The Logic Factory's design paradigm is different from that of the rest of the industry – combat and conquest (or blood 'n' guts) are not primary – a design approach that, while attractive to a larger audience (*Ascendancy* sold some 240,000 copies, and The Logic Factory claims the feedback was overwhelmingly positive), definitely hurt them with their core audience.

The Logic Factory also regrets the hint book controversy; according to Templeman, *Ascendancy* shipped with a small manual because it had an extensive on-line tutorial, not because they wanted to sell hint books. In fact, he says that they hadn't even planned on a hint book, and were instead approached by a publisher in the final months of development (only later did they learn of the author, and they thought he had done the review first, and after that asked for the assignment; Templeman says he never spoke with him). The controversy over the book continues to generate ill-will today, enough that The Logic Factory plans to never do another hint book; *The Tone Rebellion* will ship with a full manual (and no on-line tutorial).

The Tone Rebellion is The Logic Factory's first game after *Ascendancy*, and its story – knowingly or not – reflects The Logic Factory's struggle to recover from *Ascendancy*. In the game's introduction we learn of the Floaters, a race of peaceful creatures living on an island-like world (members of the Flat Earth Society should love this game). The Floaters use Tone – a substance part liquid, part magic – for all aspects of their lives: building, growing, living. Deep in the heart of their world hides the Leviathan; formerly a weak creature of shadows, its hatred of the Floaters grows until it erupts onto the surface, destroying the Floater society and breaking the world into multiple fragments. As the game starts, Floater remnants have formed, over time, four distinct tribes; it will be up to gamers to take control of one of these tribes and save their world by defeating – or is it repairing? – the threat of the Leviathan.

A real-time strategy game, it is nonetheless quite different in style from your typical Clone & Conquer game. Instead of controlling units directly, you issue orders to the buildings that your creatures came from. This lets you keep explore the big picture while the computer handles micromanagement.

While some of your activities – building structures, harvesting Tone, defending against or assaulting extensions of the Leviathan – might sound familiar, they feel quite different. Your goal is not to build up massive bases and conquer all other players (computer, human, or the Leviathan); instead, you have to move your tribe across the islands of your shattered world, struggling against the Leviathan's forces and retrieving lost artifacts and knowledge that will help you defeat the damage that is the Leviathan. You will actually move structures as you go, unlocking bridges to new islands and crossing over to them. Each island is a part of the puzzle; unlock the secrets of the island and you go forward in your struggle.

The basic Floater society with structures to use and guard Tone situated around a pool of the mystical stuff ▶

Crossing to a new island our fearless Floater defenders discover dangerous Leviathan buildings situated right at the bridgehead ▼

The Tone Rebellion is both single player and multiplayer, with varying game sizes and difficulties (the very toughest will, as in *Civilization II*'s god mode, give the computer some benefits). As a single player you choose a Floater race (each with its own strengths, weaknesses, and elements of Floater history/mythology) and fight alone against the Leviathan. Multiple players – up to four – can, in theory, fight amongst themselves, but that's a sure road to defeat for all players; instead, the goal will be to join forces and go against the Leviathan together.

A game that doesn't follow conventions is always a risk, but the folks at The Logic Factory are willing to take that risk. They say they don't let marketing decisions direct the course of development, preferring instead to let their gaming desires and philosophies chart the course of design; whether the gaming public responds with cheers or derision for something different remains to be seen. *–Scott Udell*

The Tone Rebellion • The Logic Factory • Windows 95

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RATING PENDING RP CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

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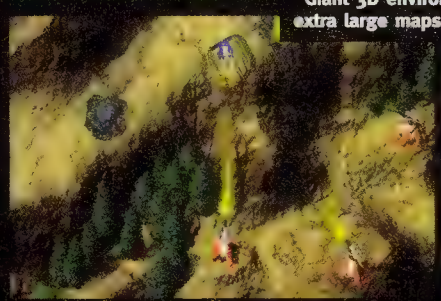
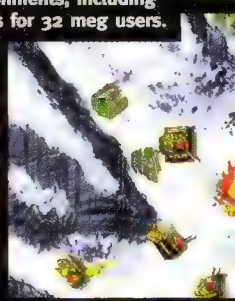
Designed for Microsoft Windows 95

Blast the opposition into smoking fragments, leaving the world scattered with burnt out wreckage.
True 3D terrain
Send in high altitude bombers to take out enemy encampments.

Giant 3D environments, including extra large maps for 32 meg users.





Take out a radar tower to cripple the enemy's intelligence.

Launch an invasion from the sea.

The forest provides perfect cover for surprise invasions.

Control the high ground.

Bombard the enemy from the safety of the sea.

3D tanks move smoothly over the hill as they move into position.

Over 150 units and 50 missions.

Full complement of land, air and sea units.

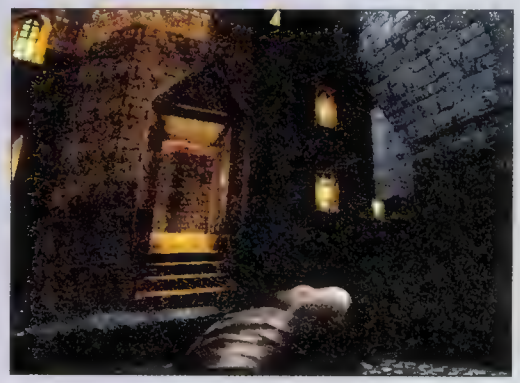
Extensive multi-player support including 'Watch and Join modes'.

Within yon mansion there be treasures...

The Dark Project

Thief wanted for the theft of the gems of Sarnoth

Are you tired of being called a camper wimp? Do you get bored with those "first one to the rocket launcher wins" deathmatches? Would you like a little strategy in your first person gaming? Well, Looking Glass has just what the doctor ordered, and it's called *The Dark Project*.



In a grim and slightly surreal pseudo-medieval world you'll play the part of a thief. Armed with a bow, sword, and your wits, your job is to earn a living stealing things for rich clients. Under the cover of darkness and using all of your innate stealth, you'll avoid groups of guards, quietly dispatch the ones patrolling on their own, and make your way into the mansions of wealthy merchants. When a noble hires you for a particularly tough job, you have no idea what you're getting into until it's too late (nor *will* you know until the first quarter of '98 when the game ships – we aren't going to spoil the surprise).

While new gamers may know Looking Glass for recent and upcoming titles such as *Terra Nova*, *Flight Unlimited I & II* and *British Open Golf*, old-timers will remember them as the folks who developed the *Ultima Underworlds* and *System Shock* for Origin. Their return to a first-person perspective will attempt to mix the immersion of first person gaming with the strategy of top-down 2D games such as *C&C*.

To that end, *The Dark Project*'s environment is more simulator then frag-fest playing field. Objects are built on a system Looking Glass calls Act/React™. What this means is that each object has a series of attributes which it "knows" about. A chair knows it is made of wood and, knowing that, it knows that it will burn when ignited, float if tossed in water, break if smashed against rock, and so on. Combining this system with advanced physics creates a very realistic world. Rather than seeking out the single correct way to solve a problem, players will use their skill set and the environment to develop whatever solution seems most logical to them.

This skill set is composed of visual and aural acuity, plus some thief-related tools of the trade. While other games give audio cues as to the proximity of monsters, *The Dark Project* takes this a step further. Your character will eavesdrop on conversations in order to collect clues and form a mental picture of the situation. When the player-character remains motionless, there is a drop in the level of ambient sound, which allows nearby voices to be heard. Of course, the guards hear almost as well as you do, so you'll have to be aware of the 'noisiness' of the ground beneath your feet, and the sounds your victims make as they die, lest you attract more attention than you can deal with.

As befits the title, lighting and shadows are quite impressive

Ah, a shadowy nook. Perfect!

As for the tools, the basic weapon is a bow – with some pretty twisted ammo. There will be nine or ten different kinds of arrows, from the mundane (standard and flaming arrows) to the unusual (water arrows that'll douse torches; rope arrows that'll allow you to scale walls) to downright magical (fungus arrows which cause a footfall quieting carpet of mushrooms to grow; noisemaker arrows which will cause rumbling sounds to distract guards). In addition to the bow, your sword can be used for hand-to-hand situations, and various booby traps will be available to keep the local constabulary off of your tail.

"What about deathmatch!?," we hear some of you scream. Yeah, it'll be in there, but more interesting is a version of multiplayer that puts teams of thieves in a competition to get into a building and grab the most goodies. The AI will be out in full force, and your various courses of action might be sic-ing the guards on the other team, or ambushing other thieves as they try to carry the goods out of the house.

With *Prey*, *Unreal*, *Quake 2* and heaven knows how many other first person shooters marching towards us, *The Dark Project*, with its reliance on using your wits rather than a rocket launcher, could be a breath of fresh air. Six or more months before the release date, graphically it already *looks* good (and very atmospheric...the environment matches the title well); as Looking Glass polishes and refines the physics, enemy AI and level design, the game should just get better. Campers of the world, unite. Our time is coming. *–Peter Smith*

The Dark Project • Looking Glass Technologies • Windows 95

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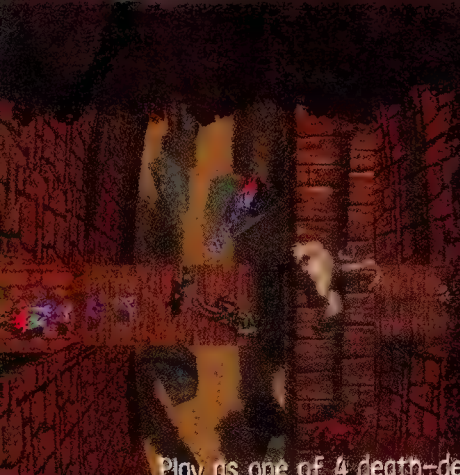
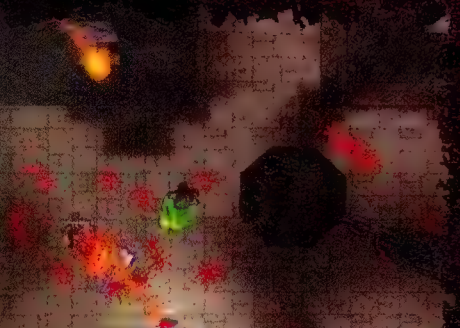
DEATH is NOTHING

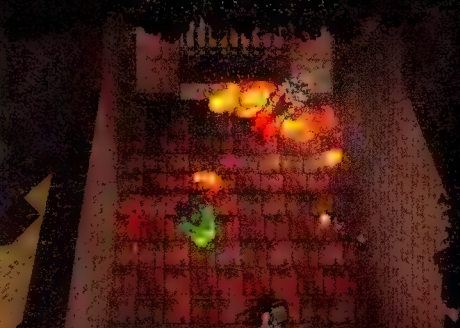


Play as one of 4 death-dealing Mageslayers across dozens of hellish levels.



Soul-destroying 3-D environments heaving with diabolical traps and mysteries.

An all-powerful war chest of magical attacks like Chain Lightning and the Firewhip.



Spread the Evil with several modes of MultiSlayer action for up to 16 players.

Death would be too easy.

Too little to repay a **thousand year old** debt.

Too **quick** to satisfy the hunger of one you **betrayed** and left to the ravages of the Mages in another millennium.

Before **LORE THANE** extracts his terrible price on your body and **soul**, you are bound to wander through five worlds of atrocity.

Stoking your **powers**. Solving infernal mysteries. Gathering **magic** and **arcane** knowledge.

Fighting your way through **FEAR** into **MADNESS** for one last, desperate struggle against **Evil**, himself.

Only then will he **anoint you** with the last sacraments of your torment.

No, **Death** would be too easy.

A malevolent 3D fantasy quest from the creators of HEXEN™ and HEXEN II™

Windows® 95

RATING PENDING RP CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

RAVEN

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WITHOUT TORMENT.
MACLAVIER

◀ The burial of Genghis Khan, 1221 AD

Temüjin

Is it live, or is it Video Reality?

"You've really gotta see it! It's new! It's innovative! It's exciting! Never before has anyone…" Yawn. Yeah. Right. We've heard this before. For everything. For every new graphics engine on the market. For every one of the up and coming members of the real-time strategy set. And now, it's yet another video revolution cheer-led by SouthPeak Interactive, a bud of SAS Institute Inc., heralded as the world's largest privately held software company. But wait. This time, perhaps we'd better sit up and take notice. *Temüjin* is on the way.

Not a the-chicken-or-the-egg issue, the origin of *Temüjin* is apparent. First came Video Reality, a planning and design tool for collaborative game development, realized by John Toebes during his years with SAS. The idea was to provide a modular tool that would not only facilitate the design process, but would produce products that would provide the end gamer with a truly realistic and immersive experience.

As a proof-of-concept project, film technicians traveled up and down the stands at the Durham Bull Athletic Park in Durham, NC, and showed with some certainty that data could be captured and formatted in a game environment that would reproduce that experience. Gamers could have the ability to back-track, change direction, and choose what they are looking at as they go. Many have tried, but Southpeak seems to have a handle on the snazziest result so far. Interactive video? "Nah," say the nah-sayers. But even the most die-hard skeptics will be surprised.

The Stevenson Museum at a glance ▶

▼ The scorpion quadrille

Then what? Oh. A game concept. "That's a good idea," thought someone smart. With the constraint that an outdoor environment would be unaffordable at this point, a think tank tried to conceive of a setting that would best showcase the new technology. And thus was born *Temüjin*, a game taking place entirely in the fictional Stevenson Museum, which houses the artifacts and treasures that once belonged to Temüjin, better known as the ruthless Genghis Khan.

A museum seemed to be the most ornate, complicated, stylistic, detailed environment that they could muster; exactly what they needed to allow Video Reality to work its magic. And the visuals are absolutely gorgeous. Because the current video decoder has problems with full screen mode, the game takes place in an interface-framed window (future games should be able to handle full screen). But no matter – the detail is still outstanding.

Since nothing in the game is rendered (except retrievable inventory items), the player is able to get extremely close to objects to examine them. There are no pixelating walls here – only smooth navigation through an actual film set aided in part by the dolly operator whose caffeine intake was negligible.

All of the set pieces were either obtained or built, from an immense art collection to several iterations of a bejeweled goat head, one of which is an *actual* bejeweled goat head that a props person came across while on vacation.

The player's objective is to find out why sinister events are going on in the museum, and to unravel the mystery of the evil that has never been truly gone – not since the burial of Genghis Khan in 1221 AD. The original game concept included some off-the-wall antics, such as a statue that comes alive and does a soft-shoe routine, but during the final stages of development, screenwriter Lee Sheldon took the helm and insisted that, while humor has its place, he preferred a more solid, true-to-life approach to the story. Sheldon feels that once the initial disbelief has been suspended – once we accept that long-presumed-dead evil exists in the bowels of this museum – that song and dance silliness is asynchronous. So much for the plaster-covered model who was cast as the dancing statue.

Puzzles vary in nature, from word jumbles to figuring out various Rube Goldberg (*they* couldn't use that term, but we can) devices, to information gathering and inference; all firmly rooted to the story (we are assured). Players will solve seven episodes on five discs, in an estimated 30 plus hours of gameplay with no disc swapping during episodes. There will be seven (count 'em) ways to die during the last episode, and when the game is solved, only then can the player exit the museum for a surprise encounter. Professor Windlenot would be proud (see *Shivers*).

Just when we thought that the interactive movie was dead – Sierra's Ken Williams seems to agree – we are presented with Video Reality and *Temüjin*. This just may change things. And if a nagging little memory of something called *A Fork in the Tale* creeps in, try to keep an open mind. –*Cindy Yans*

Temüjin • SouthPeak Interactive • Windows 95

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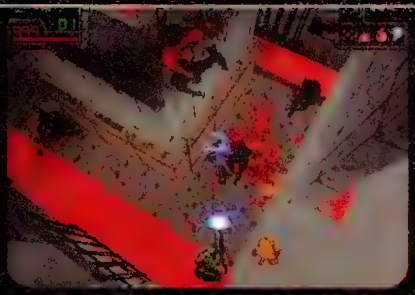
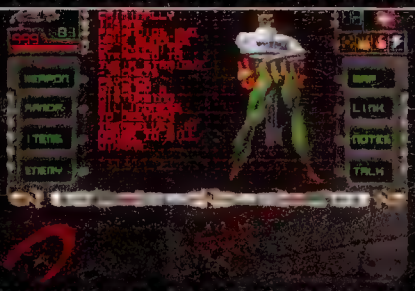
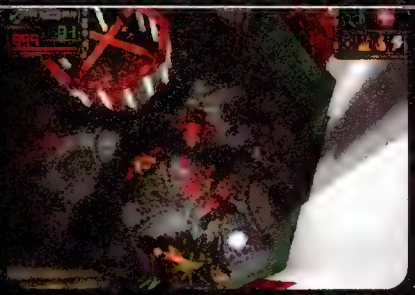


6 unique multiplayer games for up to 8 players, including Assassin, Arsenal, Kill at Will.



22 twisted enemies, each with unique combat behavior, plus 21 bone-shredding weapons.



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REDORB

RAVE

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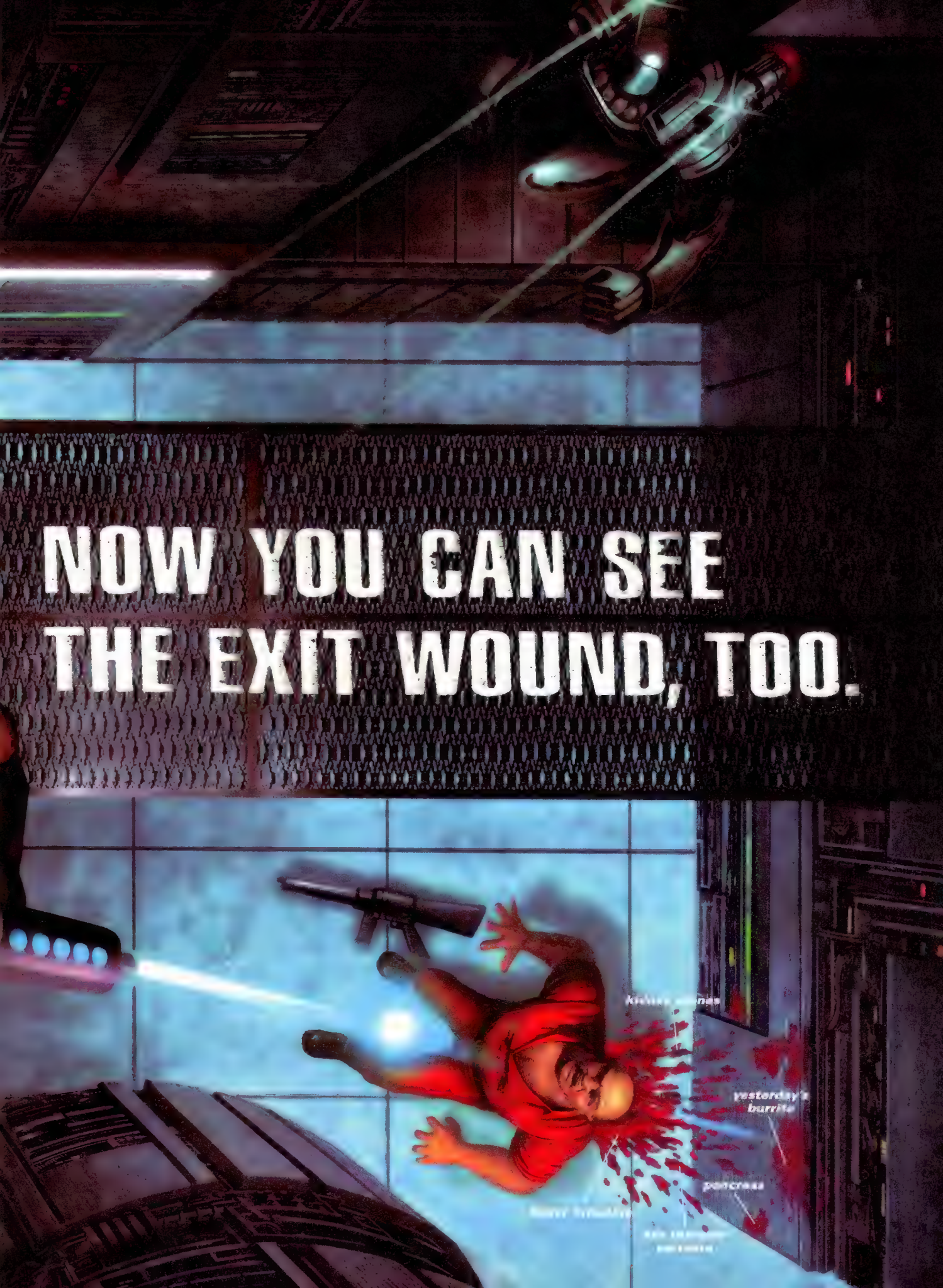
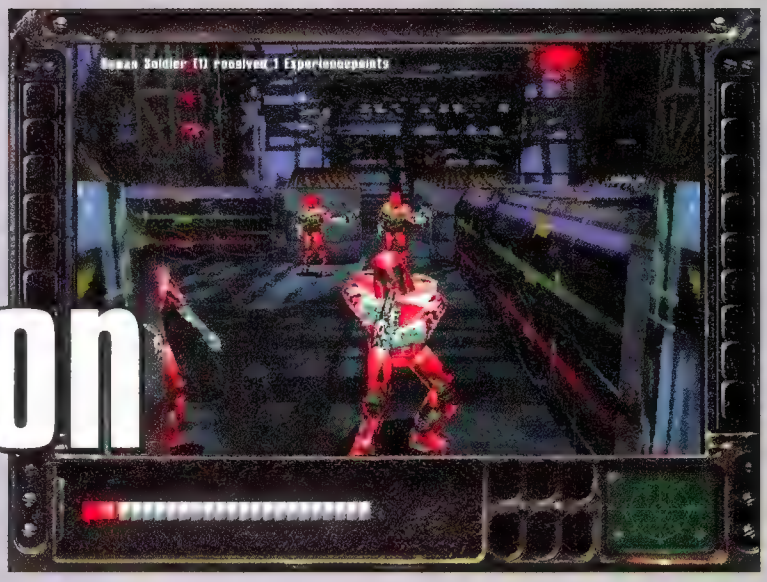

NOW YOU CAN SEE
THE EXIT WOUND, TOO.
yesterday's burrito
pancreas



From the perspective of an alien terror who's about to come fangs-to-face with a Marine's gunfire ▶

Turn-based beauty

Incubation

If you read last issue's coverage of the Electronic Entertainment Expo, you probably got an idea of just how wide-spread real-time strategy gaming has become. In the flood of games that aim only to ape *Command & Conquer* (and those games that are honestly different, but happen to be real-time), there were few titles using the style of game previously so common in strategy games, *e.g.*, games played out in turns where you can plot out your strategies at your own pace. This dearth of turn-based titles might lead one to think that such games are dead, or at least have been relegated to a small corner of gaming. Games like Blue Byte's *Incubation*, however, aim to prove those thoughts very, very wrong.

The game's story is relatively straightforward. Set in the *Battle Isle* universe, a group of Chromian colonists have settled onto the peaceful planet of Scayra. The settlers, however, pose a risk to the inhabitants of the planet, so a barrier between the settlement and the outside world was erected; this barrier has failed and a human virus escaped, mutating the Scay'Ger into nearly mindless beasts who now threaten the colony. It's up to you to lead a platoon of Space Marines to protect the colonists while they are evacuated.

◀ **Angled overhead views help you plan your squad's movement; a free-floating camera lets you check out all the angles and positions on a map (but enemies only show when your troopers can see them)**

▼ **Equip your troopers with a range of weaponry, but remember that the more you spend on firepower the fewer troopers you'll be able to take on a mission**

Jumping in to one of the preview scenarios, it's obvious that this isn't your typical strategy game. Using the graphics engine from their *Extreme Assault* action game, Blue Byte has created what has to be one of the best *looking* strategy games ever. The visuals, even at this early stage, should make some 3D shooter games envious. You can view the action from a variety of positions, moving about and changing angles; you can even switch into a trooper's-eye view to see what each individual in your squad sees, then zip back to isometric or overhead views for the big picture. Troopers, aliens, and objects in the environment are polygonal models – not 2D sprites – and are fully animated. The graphics are in 16-bit color and the game supports MMX and 3Dfx-equiped 3D cards.

All the pretty visuals, however, won't mean diddly if the gameplay isn't up to snuff as well, and we'll have to wait for the final of the game before we can make a definitive evaluation. The fact that you're leading a platoon (of varying size) of heavily armed troopers against an alien threat will lead to obvious comparisons to the *X-COM* series, and those comparisons wouldn't be completely invalid; think of the gameplay as something of like *X-COM* in a setting remarkably like the movie *Aliens* (the first time some nasties drop in *behind* your platoon you'll see why) with a touch of *Doom*'s violence thrown in. Each trooper has a limited number of action points for the turn and can use them to move, fire, open things, give first aid, rest, or go into defensive mode (for reaction during the aliens' turn).

Unlike *X-COM*, though, the missions in *Incubation* are fixed, part of a larger campaign that tells the story of the evacuation of the Scay-Hallwa colony. This leads – at least in the single player game – to something of a puzzle-like feel to gameplay, but one with a surprising amount of tension: you have to get five troopers across a partitioned hall that you know has dozens of aliens lurking. Some mission elements are fixed, but others are random, so replaying a mission won't always be a sure thing. The aliens in this early version aren't too smart, but Blue Byte tells us that these are only the first and dumbest creatures; some later on will be meaner, smarter, and better equipped, although in the end they'll all use brawn (in the form of lots and lots of critters) over brain.

After campaigning solo you'll be able to go multiplayer. Up to four players can compete in what's called Arena Mode, fighting (on the maps provided with the game) over either a LAN or modem or via play-by-e-mail. Pick a map, set up squads, equipment, and the like, and deploy them. Each side may have up to ten soldiers, depending on how well each is equipped (heavily armed or more bodies – the eternal dilemma). Unlike so many turn-based games, these Arena Mode combats should be fairly fast affairs – no spending hours to play out a game.

From what we've seen so far, it seems like all the components are there for a great game: graphics, concept, ease-of-use, mechanics, and so forth. Now we'll have to wait (with baited breath) to see if the final product fulfills the promises made. *–Scott Udell*

Incubation • Blue Byte • Windows 95

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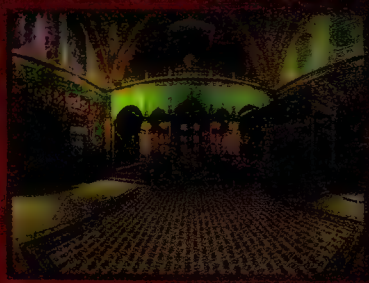

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Now this is a nasty trap

Take No Prisoners

A new interpretation of "death from above"

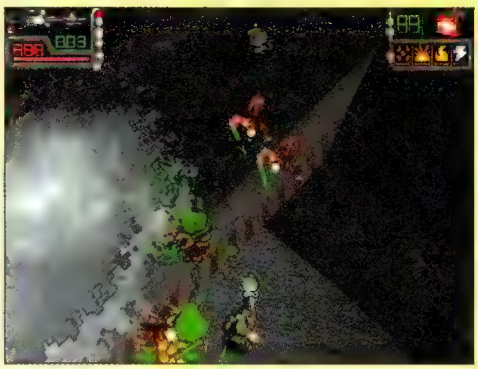
You've mastered the 3D genre with two of the most popular games based on the *Doom* engine. Your *Quake*-based game is one of the most highly anticipated titles on 1997. What do you do for an encore? How about a couple of near-2D overhead action games? Huh?

This makes sense if you're Raven Software, the masters of id one-upmanship (as in id Software), whose *Heretic* and *Hexen* won accolades from gamers, and whose *Hexen II* threatens to do the same. Along with their *MageSlayer* [*CGS+ 81*], Raven has gone back to the days of overhead sprite-based characters blasting everything in sight, only now they've added modern 3D worlds and 3D acceleration. Welcome to the retro-future, and it definitely is a bloody place.

Take No Prisoners, published by Red Orb Entertainment (the "we can make violent products" division of top kids-software producer Brøderbund), is a 3D action game from an overhead perspective. You're Slade (what, was Shaft too busy?), a Mad Max-esque mercenary just trying to make a dishonest living in a post-nuclear world. He stumbles into a town searching for a Mutate-Me-Elmo (not really) when he suddenly discovers not everything is kosher. It seems there's a dome of pure energy that shields both the source of power for the town (a refractive matrix crystal), plus the more ominous "dark and deadly secret™." By using various weapons, equipment and vehicles along the way, it's up to you to kill any and all of the 21 different mutated creatures and discover what's up.

It's all good, bloody fun

Climbing up on this guard tower shows off the transparency of the roof



As with *Heretic* and *Hexen*, *Take No Prisoners* isn't broken down into levels. Instead, you can freely travel through any of 20 territories, including a prison, the Alamo, sewers, a mall, cathedral and the zoo (ooh, lovely animal mutants). You will move between different environments, but you'll do it via trains and other vehicles. This is a design philosophy that Raven's always used, and even though it's faked it's faked really well, and goes a long way toward making the environments more realistic.

Take No Prisoners will deliver 21 weapons of mass distraction, including the Phased Tachyon Pulse Cannon, Laser Rifle, and Shuriken (oh, and maybe a shotgun or two). Items found along the way that can be heaved at the bad guys include poison gas bombs and Molotov cocktails. Defensive weapons include a Portable Force Barrier, Float Disc, Stealth Device, and Rocket Net. Finally, you'll be able to control vehicles in the game, such as a motorized gondolas and cranes. A PDD (Personal Data Device) can be called up at any point in the game and give you information on all gameworld objects (it also serves as the map function).

Multiplayer game variations include Arsenal, which will somehow determine the best player without becoming a race to the rocket launcher; Stockpile, a variant of Capture the Flag; Assassin, where each player is assigned a target in secret; and Capture the Crystal, Kill at Will and Strike Force.

The 3D engine may look two-dimensional at first-glance, but it's true 3D, with support for 3D accelerator cards (which is already in place, and looking quite splendid). Despite the overhead view, the game allows you, with the mere press of a key, to target objects below, at, or above the level you are on. There are multiple views of the action, from straight down to slightly tilted, with two zoom levels (the zoom occurs automatically when walking under lowered ceilings).

When hearing about an overhead game versus a first-person game, the first fear is you'll have limited warning of approaching enemies. That is a problem, to some extent, because you often can't see someone attacking you on the other side of an open door. But after spending a few minutes playing the first environment of the game (a sort of pre-alpha version of the game, which isn't as terrifying as it sounds), you immediately adapt to the new perspective. It ends up allowing you to plan attacks and defense better, because it simulates the peripheral vision you lack in a first-person game.

With sharp 3D visuals, a control scheme and play mechanics straight outta *Quake*, *Take No Prisoners* should provide a breath of noxious post-nuclear air when it's released this fall. *–Steve Bauman*

Take No Prisoners • Red Orb Entertainment • Windows 95

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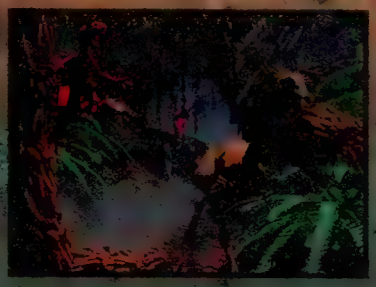

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Escape.

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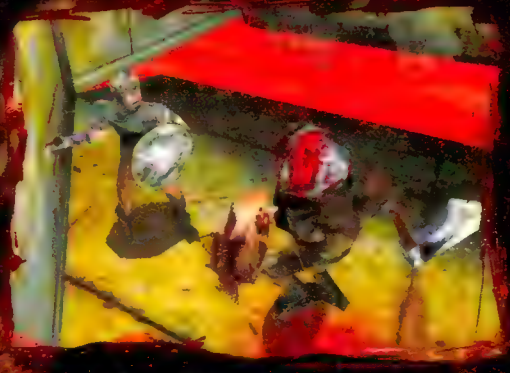

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Over the Net

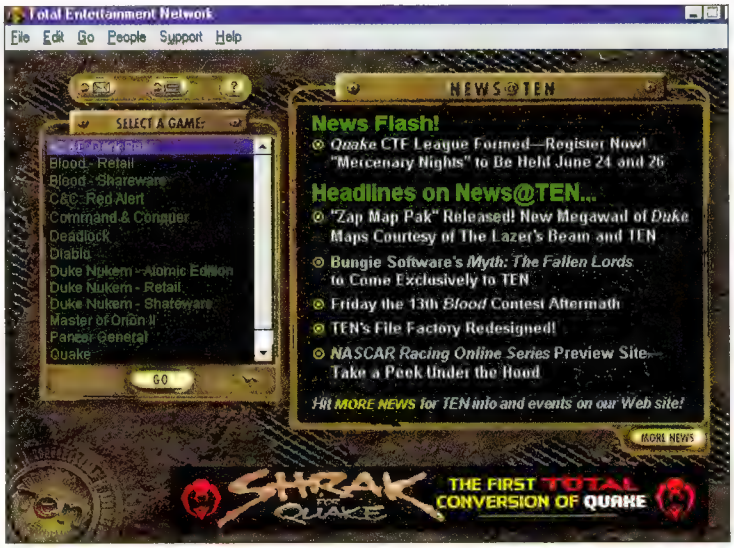
Free vs. pay services: The battle continues…

Historically, there has always been a question as to just what financial model an online gaming service could survive and be profitable with. Back in the 80s, Sierra was one of the pioneers of the fee-based online gaming service with its Imagination Network. Sadly, the required subscriber base simply didn't exist, its network costs per subscriber were prohibitive, and the service spent quite a few years in limbo until it was finally taken under America Online's wings (where it was recently relaunched under the WorldPlay moniker). In spite of these difficulties, most observers felt that Sierra's vision of a dedicated online gaming network had merit but simply arrived too early for the marketplace.

However, time moves on, and in the intervening years an interesting phenomenon known as the Internet came along. Although most people saw it as a handy way to browse web pages or email each other, several companies realized the inherent potential of the net as a networking medium for online games. Instead of having to build massively-expensive dial-up networks (and pay the inherent support costs), or buy time on such networks, companies such as TEN and Mpath could build their networks using the Internet as their base. That problem solved, the next issue the companies had to decide was what their financial model would be -- in other words, just how would they make their money?

An obvious start was to try the pay service model pioneered by Imagination. It was relatively simple, consumers "got" it, and using the Internet as the information transport medium dramatically lowered overall costs. One key disadvantage still existed – both TEN and Mpath would have to go out and get people to come to their network… and then keep them from leaving (also known as churn).

Once the financial model was decided, the race was on to get to market first and gain the high ground. In this case, TEN beat Mpath to market by a few months, and quickly began building its subscriber base. Although part of TEN's success at that point can definitely be attributed to its strong stable of exclusive content, it's also obvious that the early adopters/fanatical gamers helped fuel TEN's early growth. In comparison, Mplayer struggled when finally released, partly due to being late to market, and also due to having little of its own exclusive content to differentiate it from TEN. To give a bit of a touchstone, in March of 1997 TEN announced having 25,000 paying subscribers. Mpath was conspicuously silent as to its own numbers, but industry estimates placed their user base at anywhere from 5,000-10,000 users. Although at first glance these numbers seem somewhat impressive, they're a far cry from where they need to be to sustain these online gaming networks. Industry estimates are that each service needs anywhere from 75,000-150,000 users paying approximately $20 a month to simply break even (without taking into account any other income streams such as advertising, online retailing, etc.). Obviously, it takes some time to reach this break-even point, which is where Venture Capitalists ("VCs") come into the picture. VCs invest millions of dollars into ventures they believe will eventually turn a profit. Both TEN and Mpath are VC-funded, which, as in many things, has its advantages and disadvantages. The obvious advantage is that the companies got the millions in seed money to launch their services, without which they'd probably not exist today, or at the very least, not exist in as polished a fashion. The disadvantage, however, is that the VCs see these services as business ventures, and want to see a return on those investments.


Total Entertainment Network
File Edit Go People Support Help
NEWS@TEN
SELECT A GAME:
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Blood - Shareware
C&C: Red Alert
Command & Conquer
Deadlock
Diablo
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TEN's move toward supporting advertising is evident in their new 1.2 version

To sum up the situation, online gaming had taken off, but wasn't flying quite as high as necessary, and the companies involved were struggling. The time was ripe for a change, and Mpath dropped that particular bomb in February by announcing that Mplayer would no longer be a monthly subscription-based service, and would instead be split into two services. The basic Mplayer service would now be totally free to users, and an enhanced service called Mplayer + would be launched with additional "premium" online content for $29.95 a *year*.

Mplayer has always had a strong advertising presence in their interface

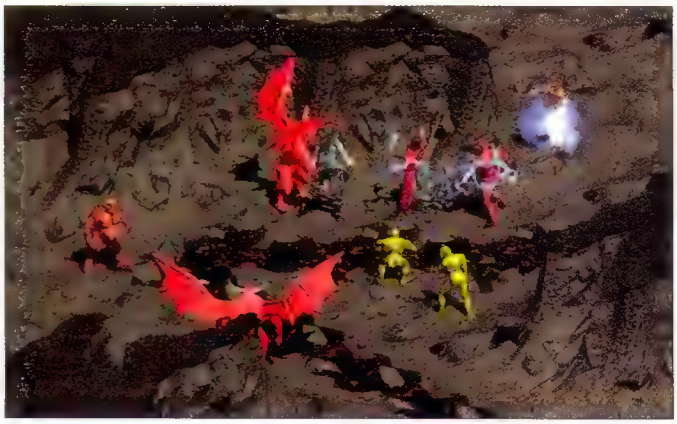
The free portion of the service allowed Mpath to support game companies who wanted an easy way to offer free Internet play of their titles without investing in their own services. It also gave Mplayer a convenient way to bolster its own content. As far as the business model went, the theory was that subscribers would flock to the free service, thus driving up subscriber numbers, which would allow Mplayer to sell advertising to companies wishing

Exclusive content such as Duke Nukem and Dark Sun Online has served TEN well in the past . . .

access to a captive gamer audience. That advertising income would subsidize the free portion of the service, and yearly subscription fees and income gained from licensing the Mplayer platform would help offset any additional costs.

Obviously, this wasn't the best of news for traditional pay-for-play companies such as TEN. On top of slowing growth and competition with the new game company free services, Mpath's move came at a time when much of its content duplicated that of TEN's. Although no hard numbers exist, it seems likely that quite a few TEN members did the math and switched to the new, cheaper Mplayer service.

As you might expect, consumer and press interest in Mpath's dramatic pricing change was high. Both users and publications announced the coming of a new era, and challenged other gaming services such as TEN and Engage to match Mplayer's pricing schemes. Proponents of the "everything should be free on the Internet" theory pointed to Mplayer as the first breath of the winds of change, and predicted that soon all gaming services would be advertising-subsidized, and free to users. To date, however, few of the other services have followed in Mplayer's footsteps. In fact, both Engage and TEN have explicitly stated that they don't believe the current marketplace can sustain a purely advertising-supported service. The notable exception to this line of thinking is Microsoft with their Internet Gaming Zone (also known as IGZ). In many ways, IGZ follows Mplayer's model with a portion of the service that can be accessed for free (with expenses being subsidized by advertising and Microsoft's deep pockets), and a pay area. However, in Microsoft's case, the pay area will consist of online-only entertainment that's been specifically designed for the online space.



. . . but equally strong content such as Diablo and Quake on Mplayer has blunted that edge

So what are the facts, then? Can a free service like Mplayer survive and thrive in today's online marketplace? Or are users always going to have to pay for the right to play online games? Putting all the pieces together, it looks as though the answer is somewhere in-between.

In May of 1997 TEN announced that it had nearly 30,000 paying subscribers; in June, Mpath announced that Mplayer had 100,000 subscribers – most of them likely on the free-play/Mplayer "Basic" plan. Mplayer's 100,000-subscriber figure is quite interesting for several reasons. First off, it's on the low end of what an online gaming service might need, subscriber-wise, to financially survive (assuming all the members paid approximately $20 a month). Secondly, it's significantly more users than TEN has, which would seem to point to the free-play business model as having some validity.

Where is this all going? It's pretty simple, really. Although most don't think Mplayer can survive solely on advertising revenue at this point, it's generally believed that it can do well enough to show VCs or other partners that funding it for a few more years is a worthy investment. TEN is seemingly in a weaker position, but you can already see the beginnings of advertising in its recently released 1.2 version. We're at a point where we're seeing a convergence of the pay and advertising-subsidized financial models. TEN, Mpath, and Microsoft seem to all be moving toward subsidizing the costs of running their respective services via advertising. Both Mpath and Microsoft already have a free area and a pay area, and if we gaze into the crystal ball, it seems likely that TEN will soon also have a free, advertising-supported area.

In the end, we're going to be right back where we started, with content being king. Users will soon be faced with much the same pricing models and feature sets, and will be looking at the content (read: games) to decide which service will get their money. Traditionally, TEN has always been strong in content, although Mplayer is showing signs of catching up. And of course, we can never count out Microsoft whose deep pockets could go quite far in wooing developers.

The good news is that these services will only get better in features, content, and pricing. The bad news is that they'll also face increasing competition from the new free services from game companies such as Blizzard and Westwood. At the end of the day, the service that offers the best value and content will likely come out on top. Although it's too early to predict with any certainty who will win, we can already see that this year is going to be particularly bloody. Enjoy the show, but don't get too attached to any particular service. –*André Vrignaud*

André Vrignaud has worked in the computer gaming industry since 1990, although he admits the Atari 2600 had a great influence on his formative years well before then. Most recently he's worked at SSI and TEN, where he produced much of their online content and direction.

Microsoft's Fighter Ace will be the first pay-to-play title on the Internet Gaming Zone

Scenario A

Scenario B

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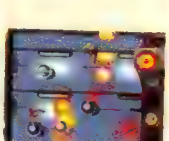
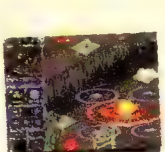
Net Fighter


Scud: Industrial Evolution

DeathDrome


Alien Race

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Command Post

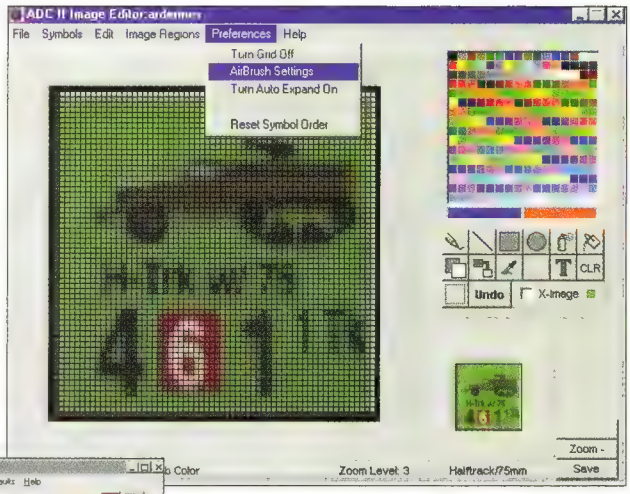
The mice that roar

In last month's column I talked a bit about wargames and the annual E3 show; as I noted then, computer wargaming is one of the few genres where maybe as many publishers *don't* show as do. While the big guns were there, most of the so-called little guys were not, so I thought I'd spend some time this issue detailing some of the upcoming products from these publisher/developers.

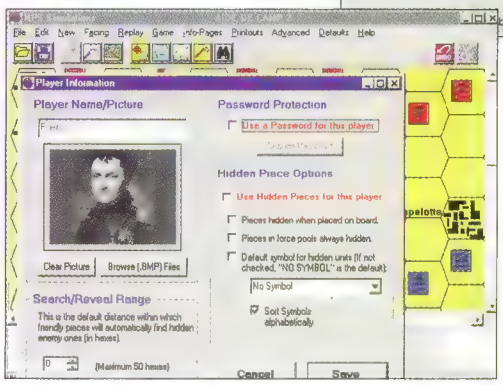
Leading the mouse pack is HPS, publisher of such *grognard* favorites as *Tigers on the Prowl* and *Panthers in the Shadows*. Originally a one-man shop in the form of Scott Hamilton, it doubled in size some time back with the addition of retired Army Major Greg Smith (known by his *Air Warrior* handle, Sturmer). I recently spent some time talking with him, and he brought me up-to-date on HPS' current project, the long-awaited *Aide de Camp 2.0*.

For those who don't know, *ADC* is not so much a game as a game utility; it let board wargamers (primarily, but it could be used for other types of grid-based strategy games) transfer map boards and counters to electronic format to support play-by-e-mail. While these wargamers (many of who are without easy access to opponents) are big fans of the venerable product, it's showing its age; relatively crude graphics capabilities, a sometimes awkward DOS-based interface, and some memory restrictions (a few really huge games like *Grand Europa* were too large for the system) all combine to make fans of the series cry out for an improvement.

ADC 2 is HPS' answer, and it should be a major improvement if all the pieces come together. Toping the list is a conversion to Windows 95 and the interface improvements this should allow; says Hamilton "*ADC 2* is a *lot* easier to use." He adds that "since it has basically no memory constraints, you can really create as many symbols and units as you wish (32,000 of each). Maps will be limited to 64,000 hexes [!]." They are using standard .BMP type files (with 256 colors) for the system, which means users can create their own graphics or even scan in graphics from actual games. For the maps, users can either create their own tile sets (smaller map files) or lay a grid (squares, offset squares, or true hexes) over a complete .BMP image (for better detail). You'll even be able to add multimedia touches to your game sets: pictures, sounds, video clips can all be attached to your move/comment files. They've made a lot of tweaks and improvements to the game support system itself, including the ability to handle hidden units.



▲ **Editing a unit counter in hi-res and 256 colors; the half track counter was scanned in**



▲ **An early look at the ADC 2.0 front end**

HPS doesn't issue release dates (they have no idea where the December '96 date for *ADC 2*, published elsewhere, came from), and especially won't on this title. Well into the project, they've discovered that their development system (*Optima*) has bugs at the compiler level, and this is what's kept it from coming out sooner (they're too far along to restart, so have to code around these compiler bugs, something tough to do when you're also making the jump to a new operating system). We can hope for this year, but there're no guarantees. Once it's finished they plan on taking the core Windows 95 code and using to develop *Point of Attack 2*, the sequel to their game of modern tactical combat.

Smith is also working on his own design (along with programmer Hank Burkhalter) which will be published as an HPS affiliate title. Called *Defending the Reich*, it's a wargame (not a flight sim) covering the German nightfighter defense against England's night time bomber raids, 1943/1944. Says Smith, "to my knowledge nobody's *done* a game about German nightfighter aircraft during WW II. On the other hand, after wrestling with some of the issues, I can see why."

Those issues include plane variants (Bf110s, Ju88s, and some He219s); radars like the FuG 202 Lichtenstein and FuG 220 SN-2; and counterradars like Monica, Naxos, Boozer, and more. Aside from the complexities of these crude radar systems he'll be tracking things like readiness, morale, and historical aces like Schnaufer, Lent, and others.

Relative newcomer Schwerpunkt is also working on new titles; after they finish revamping the first six games in their *War in the East* operational-scale series they plan on launching their first title covering the West Front. Schwerpunk President Ron Dockal says "This one is not another *War in the East* [style] game, but is a larger scope than we have ever tried. Four levels of maps, completely new user interface, modern movement method, larger map area with more hexes, five scenarios including Campaign 1940 and Campaign 1944-45, and so on." They will also continue on with more titles in the *War in the East* series (eventually rounding it out at twelve games total).

And these are just a couple of the small publishers; more are out there and more appear on a semi-regular basis. Sure, they might be mice compared with the big guys, but never forget what mice do to elephants.

–Scott Udell

▲ **HPS & friends at Origins: [left to right] Eric Jahn, Nick Bell, Scott Hamilton, Greg Smith and [in front] Doug Hamilton**

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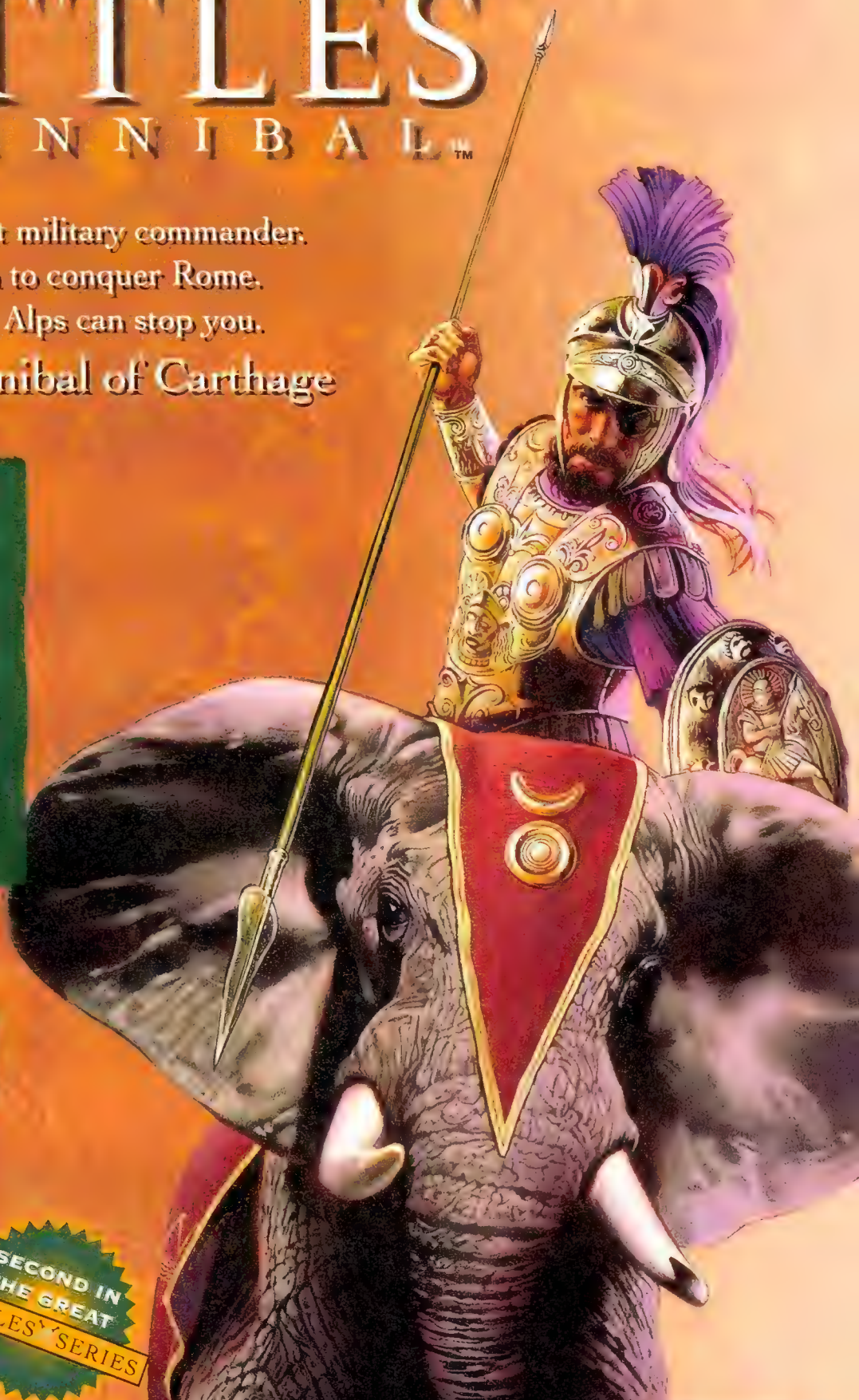

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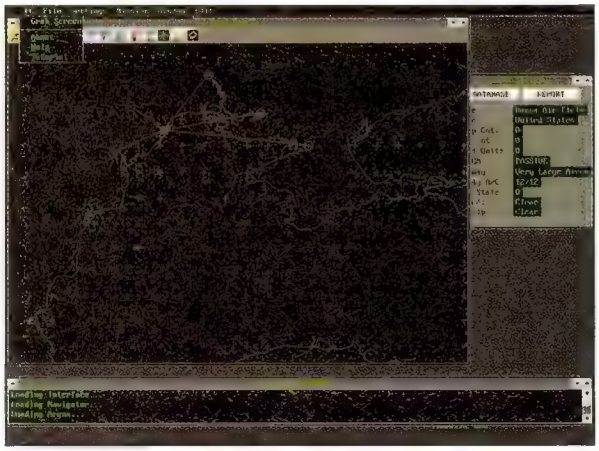
Mission analyses

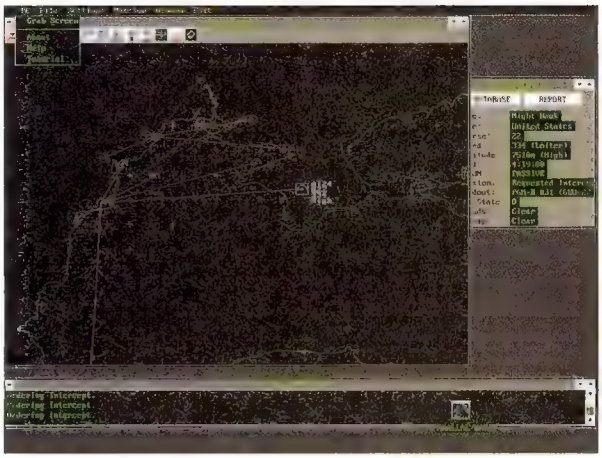


▲ Figure 1: The enemy communication network

Today, with precision munitions, we now can destroy targets with more assurance, less risk to aircraft and personnel, and to non-combatants than any other time in history. What took 1,000 planes in World War II now can now done with only a single F-117. The Tomahawk Land Attack Missile also enables us to accomplish a mission without even risking a pilot. This may produce a significant revolution in warfare.

What we will do in this month's column is use *Harpoon II* to show the effectiveness of precision munitions, determine how many planes to allocate to a target, and show some principles of parallel attack.

In **Figure 1** you see a network of communication stations portrayed by the icons, with red lines indicating the active data links. To decisively break the lines of communication, we want to take them all out at once. If we went after them one at a time, it might take days or weeks to get them all. Even then, the enemy system could recover, build new stations, repair old ones, or find ways to bypass the gaps. If we can take them all out in one fell swoop, then we may gain a decisive advantage over the enemy.



▼ Figure 2: The approach

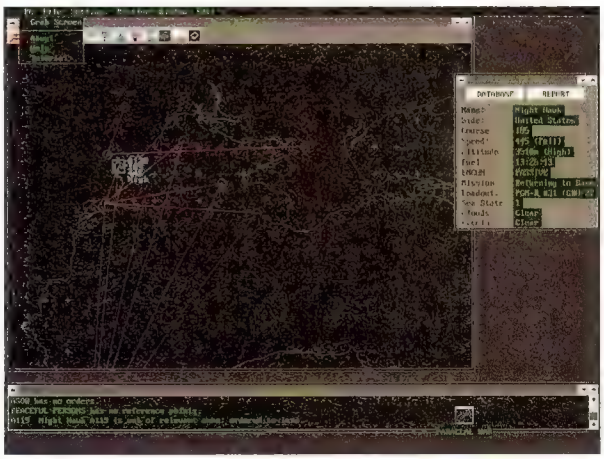
Relying on the popular literature, a single laser guided bomb has about a 75% chance of taking out its target. Therefore, six aircraft, carrying two bombs each, should be sufficient to destroy the enemy communications net.

We'll measure effectiveness simply by seeing how many targets we destroy. In **Figure 2** you can see our strike is positioned so each plane hits the target at nearly the same time. I ran ten trials of the scenario with one plane per target and the average number of targets destroyed was 2.2, the lowest was one and the highest was four. What we have discovered here is that the game's probability of hit is somewhat less than expected. To determine the optimum strike, I ran the trial again with two planes against each target. The average kill rate was 4.9 kills per mission; twice all six targets were killed and once only two were.

Finally, I added a third airplane to each strike package and average kills rose to 5.3, although the targets were destroyed three times. When using more than one aircraft per target, there were usually planes with weapons remaining available to attack the survivors. Remember, we are trying for a simultaneous take down of all the communications sites, so this is an unacceptable course of action for us to pursue. **Table 1** summarizes the trials.

Next I fired one Tomahawk at each target and they performed much worse, only killing an average of one target per mission. This is probably attributable to the smaller warhead on a TLAM. Interestingly, a single B-52 directed against each installation killed them all in one attack, but each plane had to drop its entire bombload to do so.

So, even though the F-117s and their smart bombs weren't as deadly we thought, they were still much more efficient than plain old iron bombs. Remember, in our example, there was no active defense against our attacks. Also, in your gaming remember that the F-117 is more vulnerable than it is in real life (or maybe the ADA systems are more effective). This would require a marked increase in the number of aircraft as we might have to include escorts, Electronic Warfare aircraft, so forth, just to get the strike aircraft into the target. If we take out all the communications links simultaneously, we can be relatively certain that the enemy will not be able to quickly react to our other operations. While this is not true in *Harpoon*, it is certainly true in real life and makes going after communications and leadership targets a worth-while endeavor.



▲ Figure 3: The result

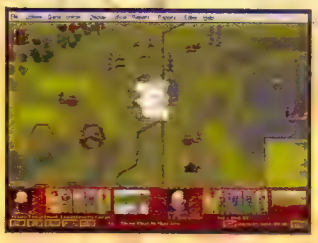
A historical example of the effectiveness of precision guided munitions is shown by the attack on the Paul Doumer and Thanh Hoa bridges. Before the introduction of laser guided bomb, 46 F-105s and 21 F-100s, carrying over 152 bombs and missiles, attacked the bridges without result. Later, twelve F-4 Phantoms attacked the bridge and dropped five 2,000 pound "smart" bombs, destroying the bridge. What a difference precision can make! For a full discussion of this potential, I recommend *The Future of War* by George and Meredith Friedman, and *The Air Campaign* by COL John Warden. *–Michael K. Robel*

TABLE 1: HITS PER MISSION

	Number of Planes		
Run	1	2	3
1	1	6	6
2	1	5	5
3	2	2	5
4	2	5	5
5	1	5	5
6	3	5	5
7	3	6	6
8	2	4	6
9	3	6	5
10	4	5	5
Total Hits	**22**	**49**	**53**
Probability of kill	**37**	**82**	**88**

WAR IS HELL.

(ALTHOUGH WITH THE RIGHT GAME, IT'S ALSO SORT OF FUN.)



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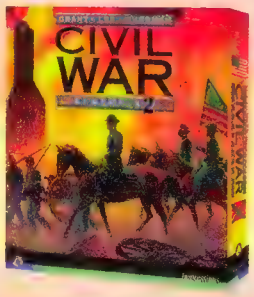

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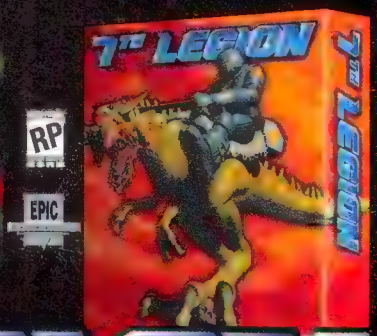

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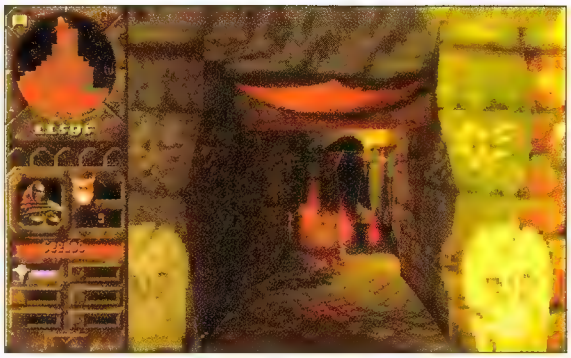
Dungeon Keeper

Subterranean homesick bile demons

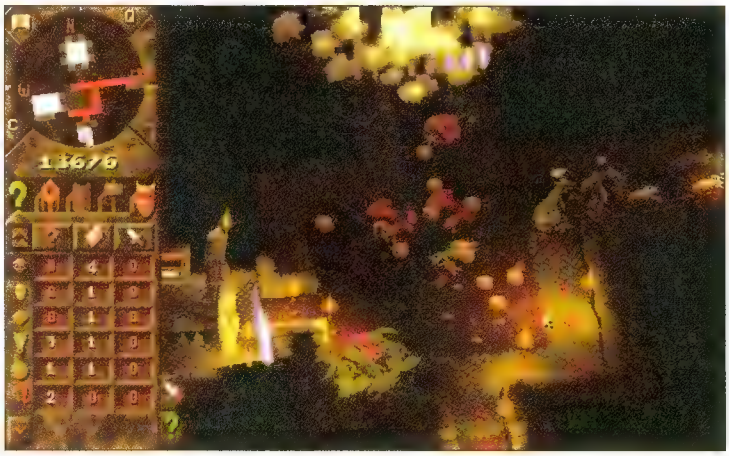


The dungeon through a Dark Mistress' eyes. Come back here, little imp! I wanna play doctor! ▶

Aftermath of a battle. Corpses galore—and soon the imps will drag the bodies to the graveyard, where they will rise as vampires! Talk about recycling ▼

British developer Bullfrog is not known for its alacrity in bringing products to market. Like their amphibian namesakes, they tend to spend a lot of time on the (metaphorical) lily pad before producing anything. Of course, what they produce is usually worth the wait. *Populous* is one of the great games of all time; the *Magic Carpets* are innovative and spectacular. Some two years ago Bullfrog announced the development of *Dungeon Keeper*, a game with the intriguing premise that the player would be the evil mastermind of a traditional dungeon, tasked with protecting its wealth and foiling the efforts of goody-two-shoes heroes to loot it. Naturally, everyone assumed it would take quite a while for this game to see the light of day; after all, consider the source. What was not expected, perhaps, was the near-total transformation the game would undergo from its initial design to its final 1997 retail form. What started out as a reverse role-playing game of almost wargame-like complexity has matured into (gasp!) a real-time strategy construction sim.

As it debuted this summer, *Dungeon Keeper* is a dungeon construction and operation simulator, much like Maxis' *SimCity* or Bullfrog's own *Theme* games, but with torture chambers, evil temples, and Bile Demons instead of hospitals, highways, and operating theaters. Players (IPX and modem support is built-in) create dungeons, research spells and rooms, populate their realms with creatures, and wage war upon each other. The solo game involves a series of "lands," with varying levels of challenges of the player's ability to manage and expand an underground kingdom. Foes include an assortment of hero types, who occasionally try to slaughter the dungeon's inhabitants and steal their treasure, and other dungeon keepers, who basically attempt to do the same. Mulitplay pits several keepers against one another, competing for resources (gold), space, and monsters. Imps do all the work, while players recruit monsters to do the fighting. Play is rather like a cross between real-time strategy games like *Command and Conquer*, and the real-time tactical combat in *Lords of Realm II*. Battles degenerate rapidly into confusing muddles of gas, spells, blood, and screams, all (except the screams) of which are nicely rendered.



A unique feature of *Dungeon Keeper* is the ability of players to possess creatures, and travel the underground world in 3D first person fashion. Each creature moves and sees differently. Flopping about as a Demon Spawn is very different than waddling around as a Dragon, for instance, and the world looks very strange indeed through the eyes of a giant Fly. Certain improvements allow the grouping of multiple creatures, which players can lead in first-person mode, as a sort of flying-squad to intercept intruders and make the world save for evil. Most of the time, gamers will be in a zoomable, slightly skewed, top-down view mode, watching over their dungeon empire.

Graphically, the game is attractive, though the 3D mode will not make anyone forget *Quake*, or even *Dark Forces*. The sound effects are superb, and the opening cut scene is perhaps one of the best ever done, with pulse-pounding music and excellent pacing. The game has a wicked sense of humor, most of which is imparted by the voice overs of a fellow who could pass as the Grinch's double; he's that good.

All in all, *Dungeon Keeper* is entertaining, fast-paced, easy to get into, and technically sophisticated. It is also emphatically not what was proposed two years ago, and thus may be the cause of some displeasure among those who have been anticipating this title. What made the initial idea for this game so appealing was the "anti-D&D" approach of letting the player run the dungeon, while other players or the computer attempted to defeat the traps and creatures defending the hidden treasures hidden underground. What was envisioned seemed to be a much more focused, detailed, and strategic sort of role-playing game, with well-defined heroes, intricate dungeon designs, and a true interactive experience that would duplicate RPG experiences but from the opposite perspective. Almost all of that has fallen by the wayside. As it stands, the heroes are always computer controlled, and are essentially hollow and faceless. The only human competition comes from other

The overview map. Quite a dark metropolis here ▶

◀ **The Dark Mistress gets her reward. "Beat me! Beat me! Make me feel cheap!"**

▼ **The Bile Demons come home. Sniff...sniff...what IS that smell?**

keepers, making this an all-Evil contest. Dungeon design, game pacing, and the format of the solo game in particular push *Dungeon Keeper* squarely into the ranks of the gather/build/expand genre of real-time games, albeit with an appealing twist. Everything happens too fast, situations are too scripted, for this to be more than a very good but still derivative real-time strategy game.

And that, of course, is the rub. This game has more in common with any number of real-time strategy games than it does with anything remotely resembling role-playing. While some complaints that have surfaced, such as the lack of human-controlled heroes, are piddling (heroes do not have a dungeon to build, so what is there to control?), others are more pertinent. The solo game is short, there is no editor, there is no Internet support, and the 3D engine for creature possession is primitive by today's standards. Knowing that Bullfrog had two and a half years' development to play with, one could be forgiven for thinking that they might have polished this one up a bit more. Farting Bile Demons, masochistic Dark Mistresses, immortal Vampires and irritable Horned Demons make great creatures, but in the end are arguably little different from the hordes of machine gunners, rocket men, and hover tanks that populate every other strategy game these days.

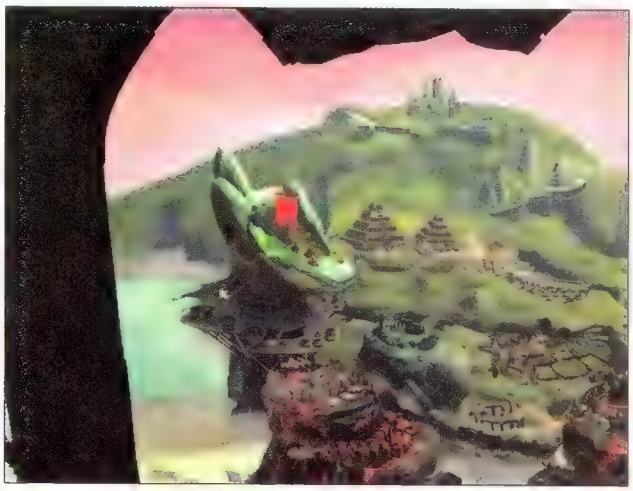
Does that matter? Depends. Simon Carter, the lead programmer *for Dungeon Keeper*, admits that the team had pretty much finished the game along the lines of the original specs, but decided it simply was not fun. They junked it, and began anew, thus the long gestation period for today's *Dungeon Keeper*. No doubt the resulting product is a fine game, but one cannot help but feel that Bullfrog was a trifle premature in dumping the original concept, which was truly ground-breaking. Much of the pre-release publicity and interest surrounding this game came from anticipation based on design specs that have not been accurate for a year or so now, leaving one wondering why neither Bullfrog nor Electronic Arts made any effort to let people know the game had changed. Gamers anticipating pitting their wits against an evil dungeon keeper now have to be satisfied with doing so as just another member of that foul fraternity, rather than as paladins of light and justice. Whether keeper vs. keeper combat proves to be the draw Bullfrog expects remains to be seen; certainly, it lacks the immediacy and traditional significance of an epic battle of good and evil. Add to that the lack of Internet support, and the rather weak AI of the computer-controlled keepers, and *Dungeon Keeper* falls a bit short of being truly excellent.

Probably the best thing to do is to judge *Dungeon Keeper* for what it is, not what it could have been. In that regard, the game is still a winner. No single element in it is earth-shaking, but all elements work together in synergy. Sound, humor, atmosphere, look and feel, and pacing are all well done. The 3D mode is nifty, the user interface is slick, and the game seems to be technically solid. Whether it will appeal to the RPG crowd, which are likely to be the most disappointed of all gamers when they realize this is not the game they thought they were getting, remains to be seen. Early indications are that even this hard-core group will be won over by *Dungeon Keeper*'s blend of whimsy, strategy, and action. For how long is unknown; the 25 solo and 15 multiplayer levels go by surprisingly quickly. The manual could be better, too. It fails to note that players can access multiplayer dungeons in solo mode, by typing "keeper95 -1player" at the DOS prompt from within Windows 95, for instance, and leaves other areas of gameplay obscure. By and large, however, this is a quality release, and worthy of consideration by anyone with an interest in strategy, construction, or fantasy games. After all, it is not everyday that one gets the opportunity to slap monsters around, pull the heads off of chickens and raise the dead. Unless, of course, that day is spent playing *Dungeon Keeper*. *–Robert Mayer*

★★★★½

Dungeon Keeper

Bullfrog • www.bullfrog.co.uk • Requirements: DOS, Windows 95, 60MHz Pentium or higher for solo gaming, 133MHz Pentium recommended for multiplayer, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-4 players, IPX, modem



The view from your dark tower...worlds to conquer ▶

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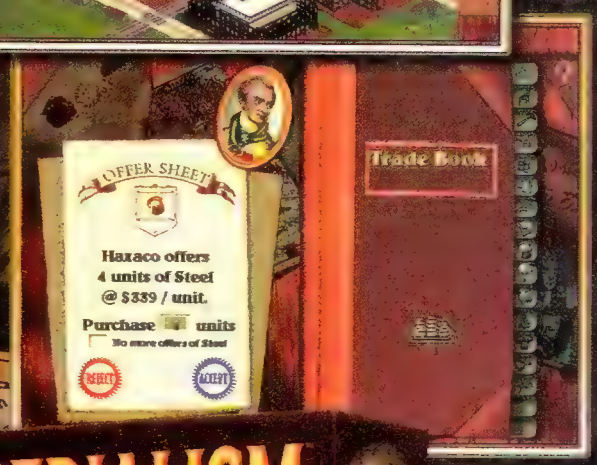

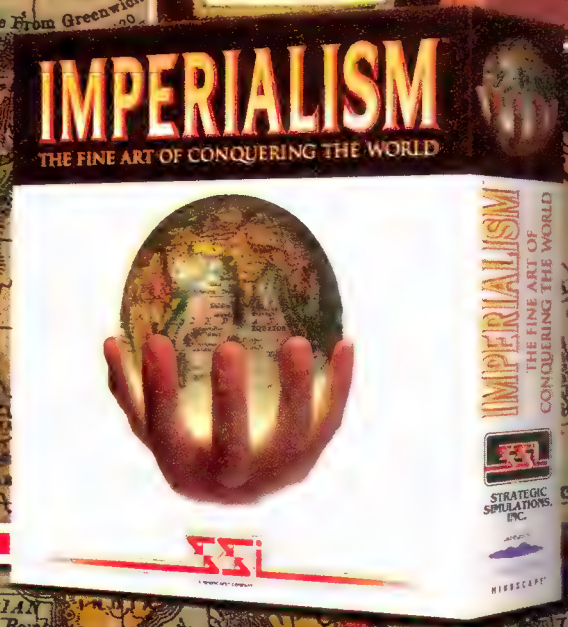

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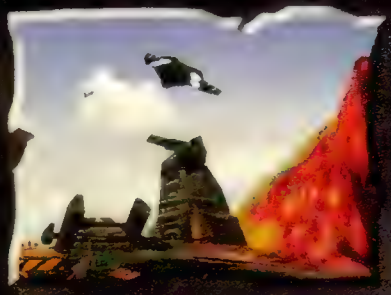
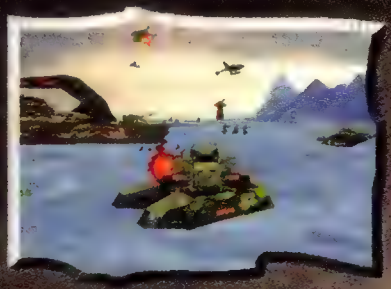
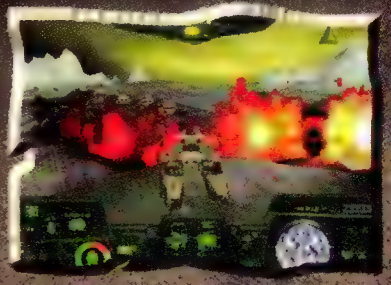


[STUNNING 3-D GRAPHICS]



[INTENSE MULTIPLAYER]



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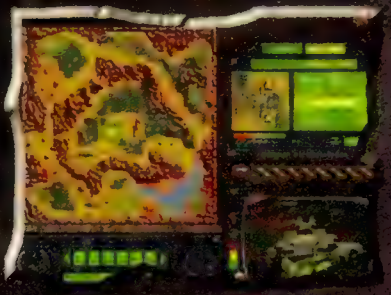

[STRATEGIC DEPTH]

[HEART-POUNDING ACTION]

[COMMAND ENTIRE ARMIES]

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X-COM Apocalypse

Aliens behaving badly

As parents, we take very seriously the responsibility to raise our computers right. We tend to their every need, lavish them with upgrade after upgrade, and instill in them our electronic values. Then the unthinkable happens: they bring *him* home after supper. He's got purple hair. He's got purple teeth. He's got the faint scent of molten leather on his breath. He's *X-COM: Apocalypse*, from MicroProse, and he makes a bad first impression.

Undoubtedly, this game bellows from the rooftops in no uncertain terms that this is not *X-COM*. Whisked into Mega-Primus, the last refuge for ozone-challenged humanity, gamers find themselves once again doing battle against the alien regime. Unlike former versions, action takes place solely within the bounds of this "City By The Drive Bay."

Right off the bat, the game graphics will catch almost all veteran Xealots off guard. Strangely absent are the dark and sinister backdrops of old, replaced by a retro-fifties motif best coined as peculiar. Obtuse, brightly colored buildings under the influence of comic book art litter the huge city. While technically speaking, the visuals excel with detail, trading in "dark and foreboding" for "shiny, perky, and mirthful" doesn't do the series justice. You won't find yourself trembling with suspense as your squad slinks towards a dilapidated complex housing menacing aliens. No, you'll be thinking of capping a few lollipop kids en route to the Emerald City razing.

Of the two viewing modes, the isometric view (you know, the one they used for box shots) will be used about 1% of the time. The rest of the time, a top-down street view composed of (once again) bright and cheery blocks, icons, and gridiron symbols acts as the primary source of feedback. With it, players can zoom to buildings, survey city activity, arm and train troops, purchase, and generally fulfill duties as X-COM's leader.

Tactical aspects of *Apocalypse* are severely hampered by the way the battlefield vertically slices itself into layers. These layers don't correspond to floor heights, presenting instances where one agent hovering mere inches above another disappears entirely. Keystrokes are available for cycling through these arbitrarily dimensioned chunks of air space; unfortunately, the effort expended makes directing your squads up a simple stairwell far more complex than necessary. Something as basic as momentarily holding down the shift key to have the mouse navigate vertically (rather than horizontally across the map) would have been sufficient.

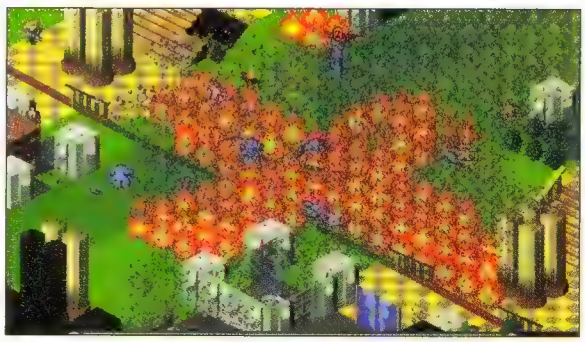
Then the parental nit-picking commences. Agent and vehicle screens offer no filtering capabilities, expecting gamers to earn a black belt in omniscience. In the same light, the purchasing menus force players to back entirely out of them if they wish to recall vital information about the objects they're trying to outfit. Squad members display sheer idiocy at times during battle. When not firing at granite walls protecting snickering aliens, they're firing explosive rounds at aliens *inches* away. No problem, except the entire squad writhes in flames, developing a maddening compulsion to douse A-1 steak sauce on their bodies.

[top top bottom]

A downed UFO, thanks to relentless pursuit by Valkyries

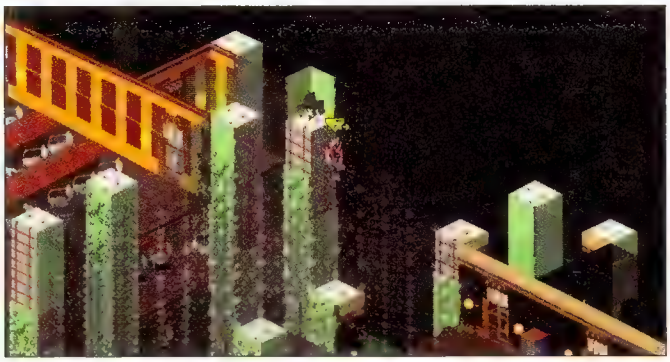
X-Tris Instructions: place the rapidly falling weaponry in such a way as to line up a whole row so they'll disappear

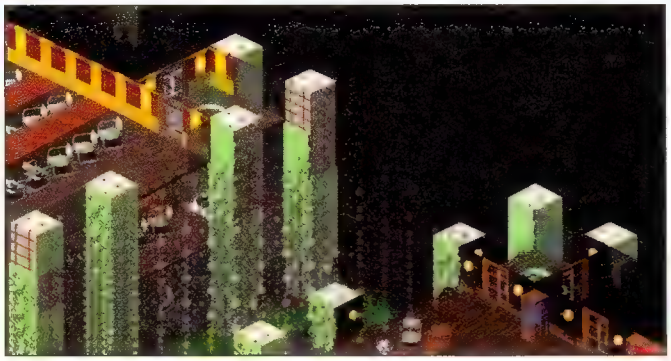
Grenades explode into a giant flaming cross, while aliens succumb to the choking heat



About the time you don the cork boots to drop-kick *Apocalypse* right off the porch, an amazing event occurs. Suddenly, without warning, you discover it doesn't matter. Not a single gripe. This renegade of a title, purple hair and all, begins to grow on you. He'll keep your cherished offspring up past curfew, entertaining her well into the morning hours. Yet, you don't care, because it… uh, let's you watch. Heck, it even advocates wearing protection. *Apocalypse* becomes a prized member of your family, and you won't suspect a thing.

The irony of ironies is that the most shining trait of the game was once the most feared: the real time tactical component. Perhaps the reason for our anxieties comes from the way the term has been misconstrued to mean "primarily non-stop" action. Fortunately, MicroProse came through like a champ, providing the perfect blend of heart-pounding action and fine-tuned control. Cycling through four speeds from Stop to Double-time, agents can be directed with as much or little player input as desired. Thanks to this seemingly tiny feature, tactical engagements now become episodes of coordinated attacks, simultaneous convergence on a target from diverse directions, or feinting an attack from one squad while executing an assault from the flank. As well, battles seem to run their course much faster in this mode. To maintain control, the player's never more than a spacebar tap away from freezing the action to ponder new orders for agents. Among other benefits, the ability to combine and split squads facilitates sending a wounded group of agents off the battlefield with ease. Despite random bouts of painful ineptitude, your troops will most often take reasonable action under fire. Sometimes they'll duck behind barriers.





Watch the odd vertical layering work. Now you see him [go up just a few feet]... Now you don't

Then again, sometimes they'll bury the behind of a duck. Must be a mood thing.

Despite the exceptional traits of real-time, some folks simply won't tolerate it. After all, they'll say, "I played turn-based, both of my maternal fathers played turn-based, my grandpappy played turn-based. Doggonit, I want turn-based!" Itching for a fight, they'll walk away from *Apocalypse* bruise free, because happily coexisting with the real-time option is an enhanced version of the tried and true turn-based play of old. Added to the feature list are opportunity fire *and* movement, making it possible to charge forward or pull back during an alien sighting. Best of all, individual tactical engagements present the option for either style of play, without locking players into one or the other for the duration of the game.

In regards to the tactical level map, the fact that one could crack open their dust-ridden *Candyland* board game and see an uncanny resemblance makes no difference. The world still thrives, Xs, Os and all. After the first few (hundred) hours with *Apocalypse,* every location will be emblazoned into your mind. You'll eventually commit to memory the most intimate details of every agent, vehicle, and building within the city's limits. Transparently, the map dissolves from a collage of bright, blinking acrylic paint globules into the living, breathing, heavily-infested universe of aliens we've grown to love. Even devoid of purpose, sneaking an occasional peek at the exquisite isometric view of Mega-Primus provides entertainment and even a little humor (though a novelty at best, it's even possible to manually control vehicles within imposed limits).

Irritation at the lack of good agent and weapon management screens soon turns to mild annoyance, followed by a non-committal shrug , ultimately coming to rest on "Don't bug me. I'm busy outfitting my troops." Divvying out weapons, armor, and grenades to each agent means keeping in personal touch with them. For that brief moment, you're not waddling up the bureaucratic chain. Instead, you're hand-crafting each agent with suitable amenities, face to face, mano-a-digital-mano. The ability to name your agents means always having a spare squad of kamikaze warriors (armorless agents wielding Nerf staple guns, all named after ex-bosses or overzealous talk show hosts). More importantly, one can't help but be especially careful to avoid thrusting squads forward into the darkness if it means risking the loss of friends and veteran soldiers.

The political shifts between different factions of Mega-Primus challenge gamers to adapt to an ever-changing climate. Though the ramifications from many of these city-wide squabbles might be too subtle to any less than the frantically observant, they *do* impact the game substantially, particularly during the latter stages. Anger Transtellar, for example, and suddenly transportation opportunities dissolve, and by association, supplies. Good luck even renting a wheelchair until recompense is made (or alien infiltration quelled). Harass the more noteworthy gangs, and watch your painfully fragile base collapse like a stained-glass wetsuit in a tidal wave. Though deceivingly calm, the underlying turmoil permeating throughout Mega-Primus can dramatically affect the climate of *Apocalypse.*

Nothing matches the feelings of exhilaration and agony brought to the surface by this game. An electrifying tension overwhelms players once the awareness of ultimate power over purchasing, constructing, research, and the addicting tactical warfare manifests itself. It's altogether too easy to get caught up in the emotional roller-coaster of daily life in this big city. Think payday can't come too soon in reality? Thanks to the game's weekly pay schedule, you won't sleep a wink Sunday night, waiting for the lucrative briefing screen to pop up with cool cash come Monday. When a favorite warrior succumbs to the relentless onslaught of aliens, you'll study science digests for some way to jump through the monitor and administer CPR. Embroiled in the epic struggle against alien infiltration, you may even discover your face on a milk carton after a sustained absence from reality.

The marriage of *X-COM Apocalypse* to your lavishly endowed computer might not be the stuff of silver wedding anniversaries. Certainly, folks in attendance at the wedding may find themselves less enamored if they've already played its older brother Daryl (and its other brother Daryl). Truth be told, it even makes a lousy one night stand. Give it a second chance, however, and it'll usher back that loving feeling of epic conflict and 3 a.m. pizza runs. Draw the shades, dim the lights, sit back and enjoy the Xenery. *–Tim Royal*

[top top bottom]

"Oooh. I'll take one of those, three of these, and six of those. Oh, and plastic, not paper"

An entire subculture of art may grow from the artistic flair of meshing the right weapon with just the correct soldier

★★★★☆

X-COM Apocalypse

MicroProse • www.microprose.com • Requirements: DOS, 486 DX4/100 or higher, 8MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: None

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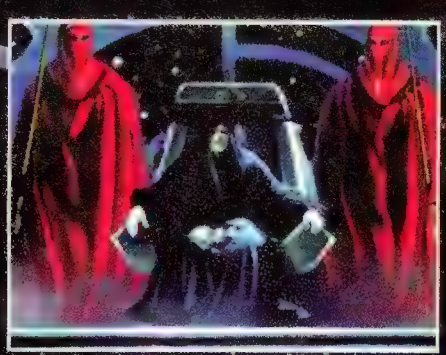

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Warlords III

Griffons and centaurs and trolls, oh my!

The third time's the charm for SSG and *Warlords III: Reign of Heroes* (OK, the first and second times were charmed, too). *Warlords* is one of the longest-running and best-loved games in the field. The wizards at SSG wisely decided not to stray too far from the path in the development of the third version.

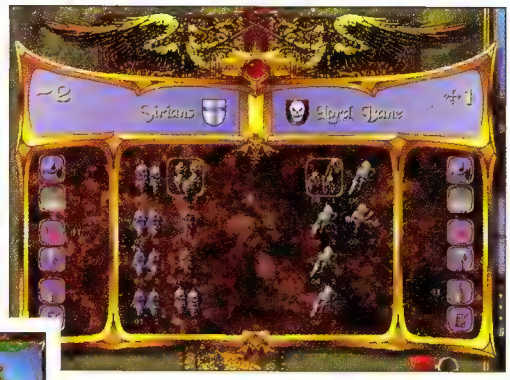
Once again, those eight wacky warlords are battling for control of the realm. This time out, two of the foulest, evilest, baddest dinner companionest warlords, Lord Bane and Lord Sartek, have banded together, and it's up to you to take control of the Sirian Knights and stop them once and for all.

Yup, this iteration of *Warlords* has a storyline, and a campaign to go with it. The campaign is a nice touch, as your heroes travel with you from scenario to scenario, and you can customize your army types a bit between battles.

Never fear, though. In addition to the Etheria (Sirian Knights) campaign, there are fourteen pre-built scenarios, and a scenario generator (but *not* a scenario or campaign editor – bet you publisher Red Orb will be offering these in an add-on pack in a few months) that can build random maps and offers many, many game options.

Gameplay is once again turn-based, although in multiplayer mode, players move simultaneously within that framework. It's similar to Interplay's *MAX*, but less frantic since combat runs without player intervention. In *MAX*, if you get off the first shot and kill an enemy, there is no chance for retaliation. This sent gamers frantically mousing around the map in multiplayer. The only time a similar situation occurs in *Warlords III* is when you and an opponent are racing to an unexplored ruin or an unoccupied city.

The army sets in *Warlords III* are handled a bit differently than in the earlier games. Here, each side has a specified set of potential units. Regular units are those that can be built in any city. Mercenary units can't be built, but can be used if they offer their services or are won in a quest. Finally, special units are found in ruins. This new rule makes the game more logical (in that a paladin-like Sirian hero won't be traveling with a pack of undead) and also makes learning to play each side a fresh challenge. If you simply must combine unicorn and zombie armies, you can create a custom army set. Indeed, the game as a whole is extremely customizable.



▲ **Battle. Once you get this far, there's no turning back**

◀ **Pop-up windows keep unit stats a mouse click away**

What would *Warlords* be without those heroes of the battlefield, the, erm, heroes? The hero sub-game has been rebuilt, with a much stronger RPG element to it. There are various classes of hero, and as they do battle and complete quests, they get experience points. Eventually, they'll "level up" and get ability points to spend on spells (more later) or on beefing up abilities.

All units have a set of the usual attributes, such as strength, hit points, movement allowance, etc. Some also have abilities. When units enter battle, there are several sets of offsetting abilities. Morale vs Fear, Leadership vs Chaos, and so forth. Combining these offsetting factors yields a series of stack bonuses. For instance, if side A has a Morale factor of +4, and side B has a Fear factor of -2, then side A gets +2 for the stack during that combat.

So when a hero levels up, he gets to spend ability points. A hero can (for example) buy +1 leadership for two ability points, or he can buy a Bravery spell for one ability point, and cast it to give a stack +1 morale. Of course, this means he'll need mana gems to cast the spell, whereas the leadership ability is always in effect and… well, you start to see all the factors that go into shaping a hero.

In addition to his inherent abilities, by exploring ruins a hero can find various artifacts that artificially enhance his stats. Lest all of this get out of control, a stack may never have more than a +5 bonus (and there are abilities and artifacts that have nothing to do with combat, such as engineering, which reduces the cost of city building).

Now, about the spell system. *Warlords III* introduces magic to the realm. All cities produce gold, but some also produce mana gems (they can also be found by exploring ruins). If a hero knows a spell, he can use mana gems from the pool to cast the spell. It'll remain in effect until the player turns it off, or that side runs out of gems (once cast, there is a maintenance cost per turn for each spell). This system works nicely in that spells produce a nice boon, but mana gems are rare enough that magic doesn't start to dominate the battlefield.

War is always costly, and the world of *Warlords* is no exception. The economy of the game is based on occupying cities. Each city produces gold, which is used to build and maintain armies, and to improve city defenses. New to *Warlords III* is the addition of special sites, such as gold mines, which add to the coffers (though other special sites give some other boon; for instance, a nearby training ground will cause a city to produce troops with better attack attributes). This is an expansionist economy, and players are generally forced to keep pressing for more cities to pay for their ever increasing numbers of troops. Occupied cities can be looted, pillaged or burnt to the ground. Once

All your old friends are back ▼

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ACTUAL CHARACTERS AS THEY APPEAR IN THE GAME

RATING PENDING RP CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Microsoft Windows 95

Interplay
BY GAMERS. FOR GAMERS.
WWW.INTERPLAY.COM

Tribal Dreams

Paramount

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leveled, a city can never be rebuilt, but otherwise improvements can be made (a village built to a fortress, and a fortress built up to a castle). Sites can be razed, but these can be built back up from scratch

Wandering the countryside burning villagers out of house and home will make you pretty unpopular. Diplomatic relations range from "allies" to "at war," with shades of like/dislike thrown in to boot. Basically, doing well or razing cites makes you unpopular. Bribes make friends, and that's about all there is to diplomacy. Personally, I've never convinced the AI to ally with me.

On the plus side of this, the AI doesn't automatically dogpile on the stupid human. If things are not going well, it's sometimes possible to keep your head down while the AI players beat up on each other. During this time you can send heroes to explore ruins or go on quests, in the hopes of gaining some powerful allies. In all, the AI is... adequate. It can be confused into running back and forth between two cities (by occupying each in turn, it'll run towards the unoccupied one) and sometimes seems to be pigheaded in its attacks. It'll head for a city with a force sufficient to conquer, but if you send in reinforcements that make the city virtually impregnable, the AI will plod on and still make a suicide attack.

Click on a destination, and the program finds the swiftest path for you ▶

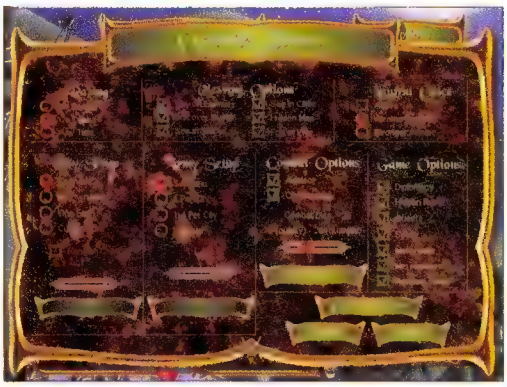
Ah well... there's always multiplayer. Play By E-Mail (PBEM) support is built into the game, as is LAN and Internet play. Red Orb has the Red Orb Zone, a free service *a la* Blizzard's battle.net that helps you to match up with opponents.

Good old *Warlords*. It's compelling, addicting, wonderful, but just *why* this is true is elusive. The parts, taken alone, are unremarkable. But the combined whole just merges into something great. Hours fly by unheeded as stacks of armies and heroes charge back and forth across the battlefield. There is just enough randomness, in the form of goodies gained by questing or exploring ruins, to keep the outcome uncertain. Just when you're about to throw in the towel, one of your heroes will find a stack of dragons willing to fight on your side, and the tide will turn. Back and forth, ebb and flow. It's positively mesmerizing.

But alas, all is not hope and glory. SSG should be ashamed of themselves for leaving out the scenario editor (no one in the industry makes scenario editors that compare with SSG's) and giving us one paltry campaign. Less serious are problems with the user interface, which is sometimes clumsy (though after your first 12 hour *Warlords* marathon, you'll get the hang of it). And woe to whoever decided to go with those positively dreadful FMV sequences. Guys, if you're going to do FMV, hire some actors. Better yet, use the artist who did the atmospheric graphics for your web page (www.warlords3.com) and use cel animation.

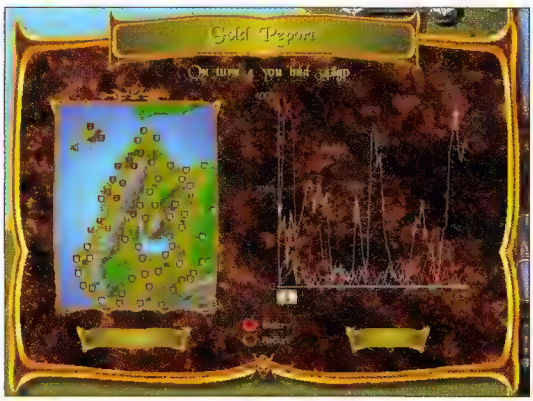
While it's hard to forgive the lack of a scenario editor, the number of options and random maps make up for it some. The rest of the cons will be quickly pushed aside, since the *game* is so satisfying. If you were a fan of one of the earlier *Warlords*, you won't be disappointed. If you're a turn-based strategy gamer, who understands how it can come to pass that the sun is rising and you're still trying to hurry in "just one more turn" before bed, get *Warlords III*. It causes sleep deprivation and it'll get the spouse totally annoyed with you. What better praise is there? – *Peter Smith*

Tons of options should keep the game fresh ▼



▲ To raze, or not to raze. That is the question

You get enough charts to make you feel like an accountant ▶



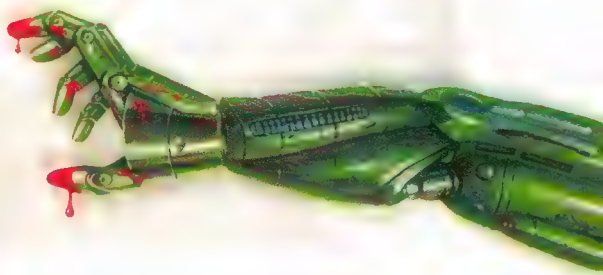
★★★★☆

Warlords III: Reign of Heroes

Red Orb Entertainment • www.warlords3.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 75MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-8 players, Internet (4 players), IPX, modem, PBEM

heroin
s & m
unfiltered cigs
binge drinking
creamed corn
one night stands

hell, what's left?



X-COM: APOCALYPSE

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"beat the crap out of aliens" strategy game

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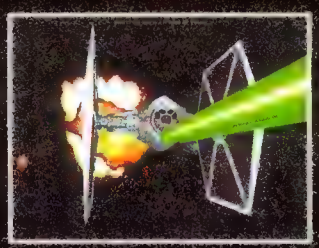
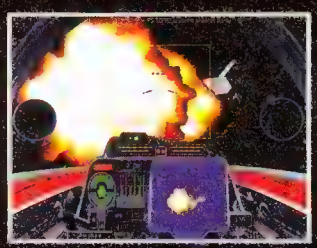
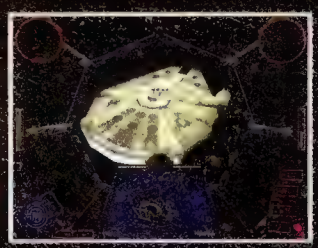
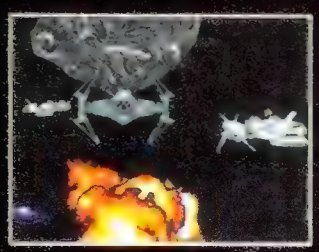
IN X-WING VS. TIE FIGHTER YOU WILL BATTLE HEAD-TO-HEAD AGAINST AN ENEMY MORE RUTHLESS THAN JABBA THE HUTT AND MORE SINISTER THAN DARTH VADER.

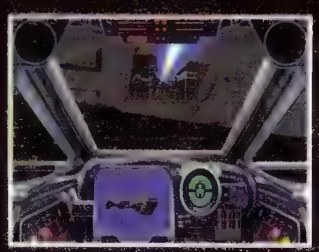
Today it's Floyd. Tomorrow, the greatest pilot in the *Star Wars*® universe could be a dentist in New Jersey. That's the beauty of **X-Wing vs. TIE Fighter**™. It allows you to engage in head-to-head combat against real people over modem, network and the internet. It's a real first, and it's in real time. The graphics have been galactically enhanced. The flight

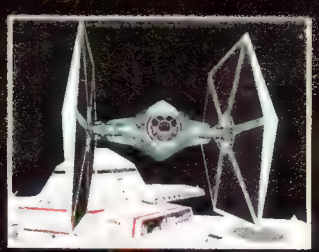




(Floyd from Accounting.)

engine is phenomenal. The new missions are masterstrokes of space mayhem. There are even single player missions for an all-new explosive experience. No wonder *Computer Gaming World* proclaims **X-Wing vs. TIE Fighter** "number one on every space sim-er's wish list." And if you don't believe them, just ask Floyd. http://www.lucasarts.com







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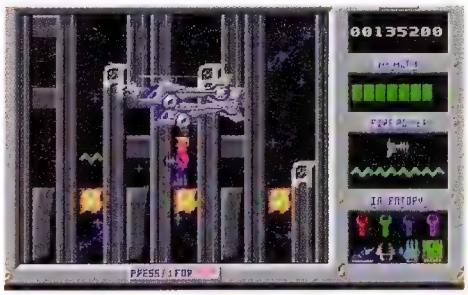
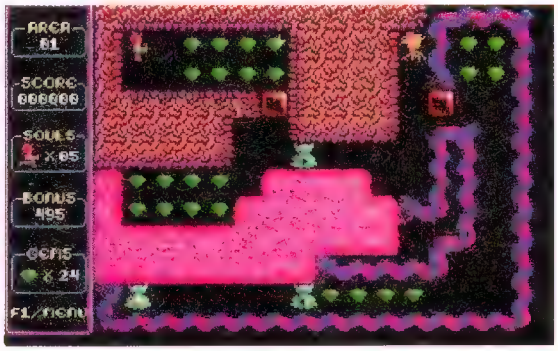
Cheat Thrills

Fighting the battle of who could care less





Clockwise from top:
The original Duke Nukem, Commander Keen and Paganitzu. Though not necessarily "better" than modern 3D extravaganzas, they were nonetheless superb games that most people really enjoyed, despite their visual limitations

If you're like me and hopelessly addicted to gaming newsgroups (it's okay to admit it), you may have noticed a trend that's threatening to overwhelm the wonderfully wacky world of comp.sys.ibm.pc.games.action. No one wants to talk about the joy of "playing" games anymore.

Where in the past people used to talk about their passion for the games, nowadays it seems people are fighting the battle of who could care less (apologies to the Ben Folds Five). Rampant negativity, hardware wars, generally abusive discourse – these are the things people seem to be passionate about. Everything but the actual act of playing a game.

It manifests itself in the most cruel ways imaginable; one person posts about how much they like a game, or how to get past point X, and one person may give them the answer, but five others will tell them they're a complete idiot for even playing that game in the first place. 15 other people will chime in how much of an idiot that person is for thinking the other is an idiot, and so on.

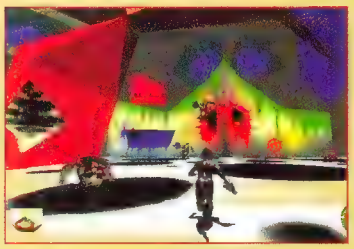
What's more amazing than random flame war flare-ups is the passion with which people will express their hatred. They wear it like a badge of honor, and will post literally hundreds of messages, sometimes in the same day, each one containing more piss and vinegar than any politician (or game reviewer) has ever experienced. It's as if these people were betrayed by a bad piece of software. To that I'd like to offer, "I feel your pain, but 95% of everything in the world is utter crap – be it films, music, novels – and it's up to you to decide if it's worth wading through the muck in order to find the good stuff," but that too smacks of cynicism.

So what? Who cares? Good question. Maybe this is a welcome trend. Maybe it's always been this way, but now with an international forum of like-minded people, we're more comfortable voicing our true opinions. Maybe it's the lack of quality releases in recent months. Maybe people are spending their summer months outdoors interfacing with the real-world rather than the Internet. Or maybe people are really only interested in talking about how "cool" everything looks with their new 3Dfx card.

Here's something to try. Take an older game off your shelf and play it, really play it, for a weekend, an evening, an hour. Something like those great old Apogee side-scrollers. Try not to think about the low-resolution graphics, 8-bit sound, or lack of 3D card support. Try to remember why you liked this type of game. Does it recapture the magic? Do you still feel passionate about the gameplay it delivers?

Or have we reached a point that without the visual and aural kick a modern game can deliver, we can't feel passionate about games that deliver solid gameplay? *–Steve Bauman*

CHEATER



MDK

Go to the help screen <F1> and type these codes.

HEALME	Full health
INEEDABIGGUN	Gattling gun
TORNADOAWAY	Twister
HOLOKURTISFUN	Decoy
ILIKETOLOB	Mortor
NASTYSHOTTHANKS	Homing grenade

Shadow Warrior

In the shareware version, press <T> then enter:

SWCHAN	God mode
SWGIMME	All items
SWGREED	All cheats
SWTREKxy	Warp to episode X, level Y
SWLOC	Framerate display
SWRES	Change resolution
SWSTARS	Restart level
SWGHOST	No clipping
SWMAP	Automap
SWTRIX	Bunny rockets

Extreme Assault

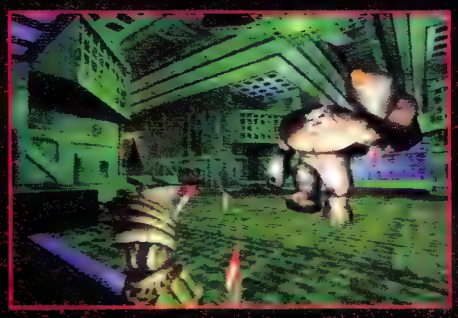
At the main menu, type "levelx " where you leave a space after the x. Then hold <ALT> and press:

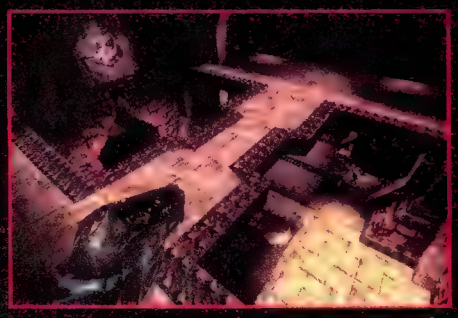
1	Full ammo
2	Weapon upgrade
3	Energy
4	God mode
6	End mission
7	Deactivate enemies
8	Switch to copter
9	Switch to tank

X-Men: Children of the Atom

We were unable to test this, but a fellow named Dan Sid has posted this information to the Internet: "To use Magneto and Juggernaut, go to the option menu by pressing <F10> and go to the configuration menu. Once there, type in the word SPAM . After this, go into system and you will see a new option called BOSS SELECT. Enable this option and then save the new settings. Start a normal game and select a fighter and block mode. Before the battle loads, hold all three punches down for Juggernaut or all three kicks down for Magneto. Continue to hold down the buttons until the battle finishes loading. From then, you should be able to use your new boss character." There you go.

REAL





Your ship has crash landed on an unknown planet.

Look around. Crystal clear water shimmers. Shadows shift. Alien architecture fades into the horizon. Darkness falls. Walkways glow. Godless temples beckon. You are afraid. You are in the real world...but it is like no world you have ever known. You are an uninvited guest in the fastest, sleekest, most beautiful 3D world ever created. Live it. Breathe it. Survive it.

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LOOK FOR THE NOVEL FROM POCKET BOOKS

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Wipeout XL

If looks could kill we'd have a homicide

Lush 3D environments are present throughout

A couple of years ago, Psygnosis released *Wipeout* for the Sony PlayStation and some in the press heralded it as the next revolution in gaming. The PC version came later, and if that was a revolutionary game, than it was rather dull one, featuring the deadly combination of poor graphics, frame rate and control.

What a difference a couple of years make. With the release of *Wipeout XL*, once again a few months after the PlayStation version wowed the critics, the PC has leapfrogged the console systems. In a big way. A simple arcade racing game, the controls are the equal of the consoles', the game's 3D graphics are blazingly fast, and overall it's the best-looking racing game ever created – perhaps even the best looking 3D game on the market. Sorry *Pod*, you've been surpassed.

In keeping with its emphasis on style-over-substance, a fantastic intro movie sets the tone. It's may well be one of the best ever seen in a videogame (good enough to be used in the music video for "Atom Bomb" by Fluke, which is in regular rotation on MTV). This brings up the music, which in the PlayStation version of the game was good enough to warrant its own best-selling music CD. However, that music (with such heavyweights as the Chemical Brothers) didn't make the translation, replaced by good, but ultimately repetitive techno (or electronica, as it's been re-dubbed for US consumption).

Wipeout XL requires a 3D accelerator and as a showcase for cutting edge 3D technology, it's an unqualified success. As a gameplay experience, its long-term play value is hindered by a lack of gameplay options, vehicles and tracks. But it serves a purpose, and serves it well – it'll humble the most devoted PlayStation or Nintendo 64 owner.

–Steve Bauman

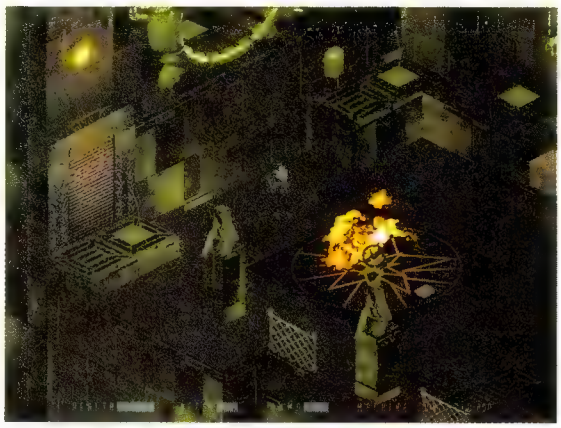
★★★★☆

Wipeout XL

Psygnosis • www.psygnosis.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 133MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 3D accelerator, 2X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: None

Meat Puppet

The bad game with the bad name



The graphics certainly aren't the problem

Anyone who thinks reviewing games is glamorous has obviously never tried to play *Meat Puppet* to completion. It's a punishing game, one that serves up one frustration after another with little to no payoff. And that's just the first level…

You control Lotos Abstraction, trying to complete a series of assassinations before you're killed by an implant that's set to go off. While the story may be interesting, it also brings up the major design flaw of the game – it has a time limit. While it's obvious why you might want to do this (it adds tension), in reality it ruins the game, discouraging the exploration that the detailed and interesting environments encourage. The documentation even goes so far as saying "if you want to kill everything or pick up all the power ups you probably won't make it in time for the big finale," which begs the question, "Why bother making the environments so densely packed with stuff?"

It gets worse. There are two control options for the game, neither of which is adequate. Both require the keyboard and mouse to perform multiple functions, most of which cannot be done simultaneously (for example, you can't fire while running). There's no granularity to the controls – everything moves in jerks and spasms. Compare the digital movement in this game to the smooth and fluid keyboard-driven *Tomb Raider*, or the complex but manageable *Crusader* series.

The sound effects are repetitive, and after spending an hour or so with the game, you'll be repeating "subdue the intruder – he must be contained" in your sleep. The looped music contains so few motifs it's like listening to a scratched nine inch nails CD.

Had they spent as much time on the playability of the game as they did on the aesthetics, perhaps *Meat Puppet* could have been salvaged. With excellent graphics that are unable to mask the dreadful gameplay, *Meat Puppet* is a game that, to quote the band Pavement, has "miles and miles of style, so much that it's wasted."

–Steve Bauman

★☆☆☆☆

Meat Puppet

Playmates Interactive Entertainment • www.playmatestoys.com/pie.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 90MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: None

The Ultimate
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Vehicle
ARMORED
FIST 2
M1A2 ABRAMS
From NovaLogic, the company that brought you the best-selling combat simulations F-22 Lightning II® and Comanche® 3.
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NOVALOGIC - THE ART OF WAR™
TEEN
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AGES 13+
CONTENT RATED BY
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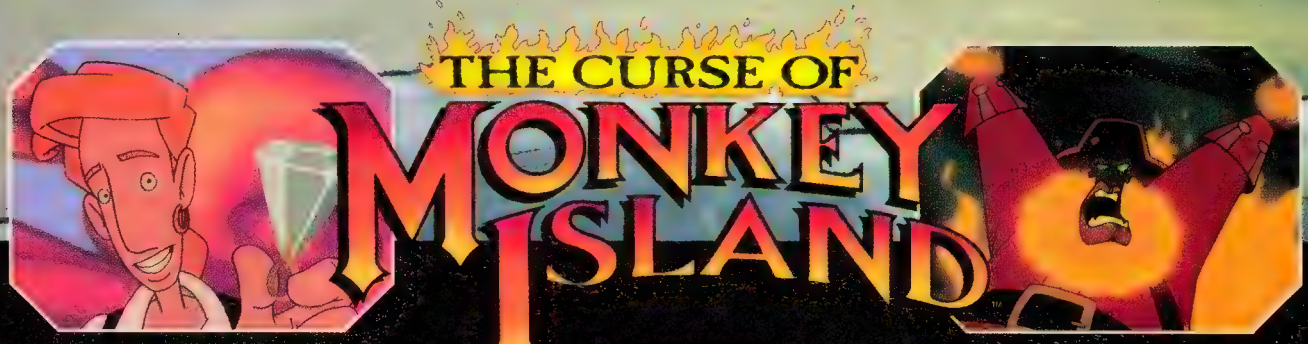
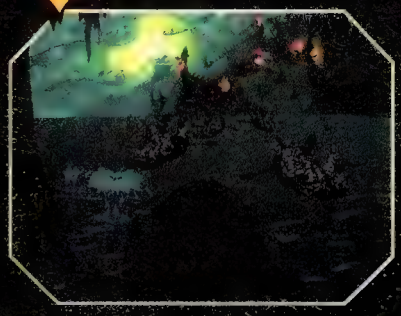
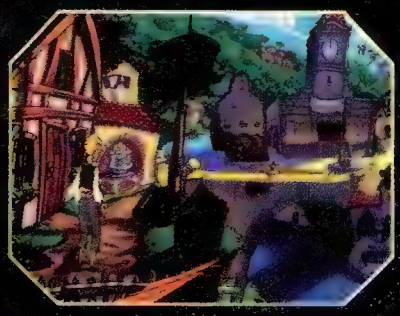
Introducing the only pirate adventure that asks the question: What's sharper, your sword or your wit?







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Road to Nowhere

Input? It's been gone for a long time

[clockwise from top left] Starship Titanic's examining table – look ma, no stirrups!; Does the white house of Zork Grand Inquisitor match your memory of it? Thanks to the parser, you can talk to this bot directly; When instruments play themselves

Why are games fun? As we know, there are countless answers to this question. We enjoy a reason to leave the world as we know it for a few blissful hours of… what? Avoiding *Men Behaving Badly*… For action-arcade gamers and flight sim lovers, the activity involves a visual/mechanical relationship best titillated by intricate graphics. For adventure gamers, the escape to another dimension lies in their imagination. Is imagination best fed visually? Almost no one will say yes to that, and yet, here we are in Movie-of-the-Week paradise, with Comix and Cliff Notes having provided a great deal of our literary background.

At the gaming dawn of time, when the only pictures were in our minds, the written word was supreme being, and the parser the divine courier. "Take slimerod," you type. "You pick up the slimerod," answers the game. "Wow! Incredible! How did it *know*?"

Back at this year's E3, Simon & Schuster and Digital Village were showing Douglas Adams' new game, *Starship Titanic* [see interview with Adams in this issue]. The presenters were very excited about the exciting, revolutionary new feature they were about to reveal. "It's…[suspense builds] a parser!" Somehow, someone decided that when graphic point & click adventures became the norm, it was because we were in a "post literate age." Now, apparently, with the advent of e-mail and Internet communication, we are in a "post post literate age." We can read and write again! (Read and write, yes. Spell? Well that's a different story.) And hence, we are ready (again) for all the benefits a parser has to offer.

I spoke recently with Linda Watson of Virtus Corporation, designer of the parser for *Starship Titanic*, who agrees that the time has come for parser enhanced AI to contribute to the post post literate adventure. Watson feels lucky that this project enabled her to work her particular brand of magic in a world where she not only got to be master of the entire parser design, but got to hang out with Douglas Adams and crew in London, as well as don a lime green body suit and purple cape and appear as a superhero in the game itself. (Only the latter is recognized as true accomplishment by her family.)

Watson certainly realizes that an adventure game parser is not new. "We know that we're just back to the future here, but what we *haven't* had before is a whole 3-D world with a parser *in* it, so that you get both – the visual immersion and the sound immersion – plus you get to talk to things." Based on Shank's work in language processing, Watson's parser sports a multi-layered design (she likens it to an onion) that will, level by level, derive the user's input. From the moments when the most complicated thing it could understand was "I throwed the red blue chocolate," to now when it can interpret a broad range of complex sentences and find *some* intelligent context sensitive response, the *Titanic* parser has produced more than a couple of smiles. Some of its earliest, more memorable exchanges were: "Give me a beer" which evoked "Take me!" and "I throw a parrot." (don't ask) which returned "You cannot throw a chicken or a parrot."

As far as parsed input sent *to* the program, "tell me how to eat" became "you eat me," and "what sex are you?" was delivered as "what is sex?" "We used news reports as test input a lot of the time, but news reports are written by professionals who don't misspell, use incomplete sentences, use profanity or talk about sex all the time. I spent a really grim morning with a slang dictionary putting in all sorts of nasty words." She also spent a lot of time building an idiom base, so that the parser would not be taxed trying to literally interpret things like "a bad hair day" or "Here's looking at you, kid."

Marc Blank, creator of the Zork universe, believes that parsers and text adventures have no commercial viability these days. Despite this fact, he has produced a text adventure for Activision to be included with their upcoming *Zork Grand Inquisitor*. Why? "I'm just interested in a reaction. Folks *say* that they always thought text adventures were pretty great – maybe because it's the cool thing to say." Currently his own company, Eidetic, is working on action titles for the Sony PlayStation. Post post literate age? Blank just laughed.

I, for one, am *thrilled* to see a parser on the horizon. I was initially *insulted* by the "smart cursor." And with AI and text-to-speech technology growing by leaps and bounds along with 3-D graphics capabilities, I don't see why we can't have the best of both worlds. "A dwarf throws a nasty knife at you and misses." Good. *–Cindy Yans*

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SIERRA

Boots of Re

Angling in Antara

Sell items by click/dragging them onto the Inn's shield

This month's column features hints and tips for the first three chapters of Sierra's popular role-playing adventure *Betrayal in Antara*. The tavern has been filled all month with contentious gamers arguing their pro, con and neutral views about *Antara*'s merits [see our review on page XX]. Bashed, Battered and Bewildered have broken up more than a few bloody fights. Talk about your flame wars! The boys sport red badges of courage but I've managed to keep out of harm's way. It isn't easy dodging mugs of ale while hiding behind the bar. *Heh-heh.*

Hot & Not

Betrayal in Antara was the most popular role-playing adventure in July. The keyboard-controlled, action-adventure *Twinsen's Odyssey* garnered the most adventure game messages.

Betrayal in Antara

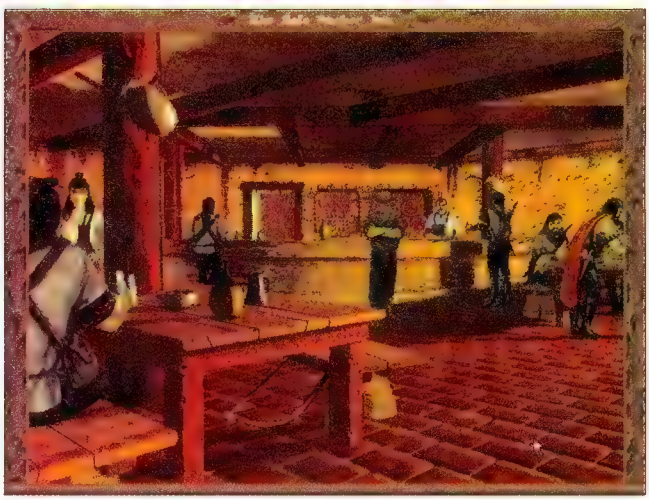
Play *Antara* at the Hard level (the other levels are too easy). The game is divided into chapters. Each chapter has a main task to complete as well as many side adventures. The game begins east of Briala. Click on the body in the road and click/drag items from it to your party. After stripping the body, save your game and go west to Briala. Check out where you are on the world map, When it gets dark, get off the road and camp. Sleep until dawn and resume your journey. Camping (and resting) is the cheapest way to partially heal your party. Paying for a night in an Inn fully restores health points.

During combat, protect your party members by moving them away from the enemy when they are badly injured. Kill enemy magic users before they can cast their spells. Replay a battle if any party member is so badly hurt that they can't restore their health points while resting.

Every item you find can be sold to a shopkeeper, but each village has different shops. In Briala the shopkeeper will not buy armor or weapons, but one will in some of the villages to the south and to the west in Imazi. To sell items to a shopkeeper, enter the store, click on the shopkeeper, then click on one of your characters. Click/drag items you want to sell to the shop's icon in the lower right hand corner. The Anvil in Panizo sells chain mail armor. After knocking on all the doors – and outfitting your adventurers in chain mail – in Briala, Aspreza, Balmestri, Sortiga, Imazi, Aliero, Ligano, and Midova, complete Chapter One by going to the Escobar Estate in Panizo.

Side adventures in Chapter Two require return visits to the above cities and knocking on more doors in Waterfork, Cardone, Levoshe, Ormede, Ravenne, Melay and Varnasse. Your main task is to first visit Finch near Midova and then go to Peerless Imports in Midova and ask about *Chailan Tea From Paolo* . It won't be available for a week. Come back a week later and you'll find the shop was ransacked and Paolo is in debt. Talking to Leon at the Greener Pasture Inn will lead you to Antoni (in his bank) who'll settle Paolo's debt (and return his Chailan Tea) for gems from Enkudi. Enkudi is between Sortiga and Ligano. Take the tea to Finch and then go southwest from Midova to find a canyon that leads to a bridge to Ticor. Go northwest through the forest to the river. Follow the river west to a section shallow enough to cross, and then go directly to Ticoro.

In Chapter Three, talk to Raal then Scott Gratisi about *Rooms* and the innkeeper will rent out a room. To survive Ticoro, sleep at the Henne's Shadow Inn every night. Talk to Lord Caverton at his palace and show him the Shepherd medallion. Go to the Tabernacle of Henne and talk to Fellich Marr about the *Daughter Heir*. Continue north to the gatehouse and talk to the guard. Try to open the western rampart gate then go to the Knight's Promise Inn and talk to Selana, showing her the Shepherd medallion. Go south to Keys and bolts and talk to Coulaine and ask for the Rampart Key. He'll send you on a mission. Go to the southeast corner of town and catch Torrance, then talk to Coulaine to get the key. Open the gate, go north, then east, and click on the hole in the ground. Go to the southwest quarter of the city to The Green and the White Inn. Talk to the sitting guard. Return to the Henne's Shadow Inn and the chapter ends. – *Andy Backer*

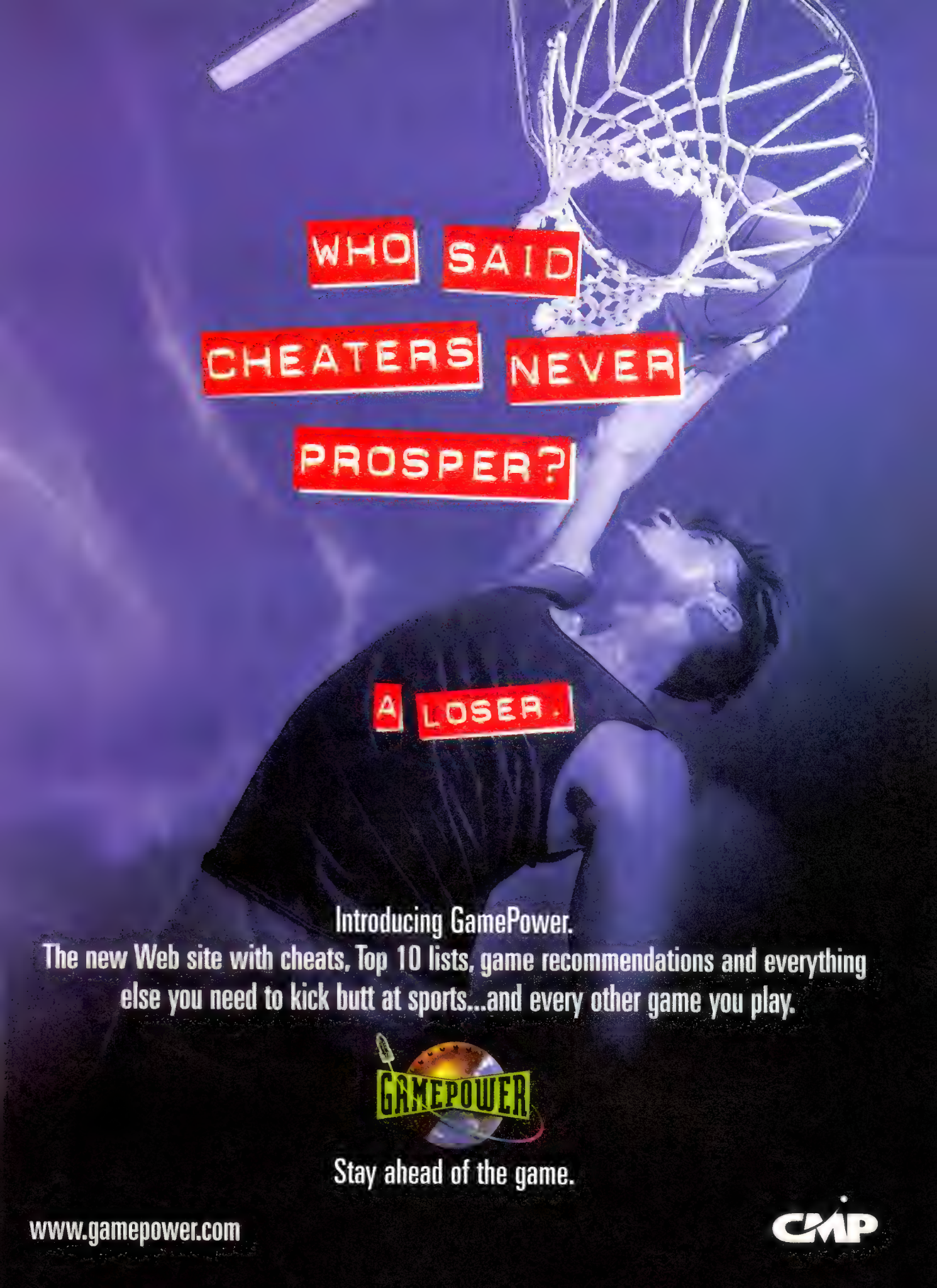


[clockwise from top right]

The outside of the Safe Harbor Inn in Balmestri

Farmer Brunia is the waiter in the Inn

In Chapter One, talk to Farmer Brunia and then talk to Korellyn north of Sortiga and Lord Garson in west Imazi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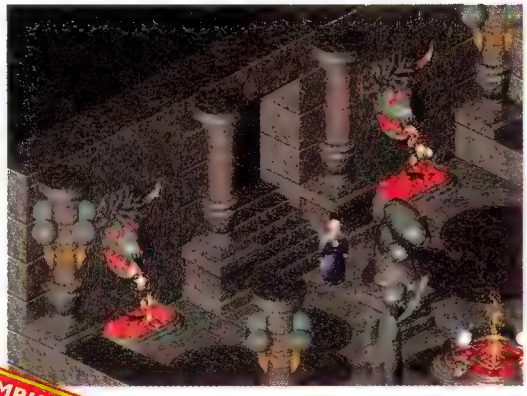
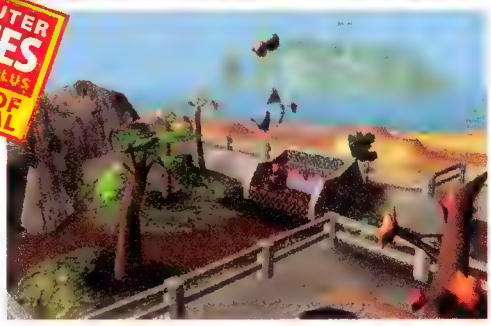
Twinsen's Odyssey

The Iliad meets the odd





[clockwise from top]
The beatification of our hero
The weather wizard calls in a marker
Balloon fest at the Temple of Bü
Dark Monk's temple

Take a planet full of Samurai warriors complete with topknot ponytails, supply them with amphetamines, Slim-Fast, a few Lean Cuisine entrees, a copy of *Sweatin' to the Oldies II*, and you've got a batch of Twinsunians – natives of the planet Twinsun – loyal, feisty and cute as the dickens. One Twinsun national has the good fortune of being named Twinsen, a vowel away from namesake-ness, joining the realm of such greats as Vinus, Plito and Mirs.

As unlikely a hero as you'll ever meet, Twinsen has just recovered from saving his planet from the evil Dr. Funfrock (who wears dresses for enjoyment) in the sleeper hit *Relentless: Little Big Adventure*. Adeline Software has recreated the little guy in an entirely new story, initially titled and still often referred to as *Little Big Adventure 2*. Twinsen is much beloved by those on his planet and by so many who have played the original. Happily, he's back… and this is his story.

Life has been peaceful on the plant Twinsun, and Twinsen and his wife Zoe are expecting their firstborn. Zoe, "great with child", is a modern Twinsunian; no flowing maternity smock for *her*. Instead she bounces around in a red spandex jumpsuit, tending to her ailing pet Dino-fly, appearing on Oprah, and being otherwise productive. Before long, however, the tranquillity is shattered as space shuttles appear carrying Esmers. These initially unassuming visitors from the planet Zeelich, with pointy chins and hypotenuse heads, claim to be observing Twinsunian culture, and promise to deliver fabulous new technology to the planet. The gullible inhabitants believe them until, before too long, they begin importing tanks, weapons and bulldogs, replacing the previously most dangerous thing in town – a kid on a roof with a pea shooter. The wizards and children of Twinsun mysteriously disappear ("wizards and children first," right?), and Twinsen discovers that the Esmers are the pawns of the depraved Dark Monk in a much more nefarious plan that threatens to destroy his planet. To save it, he must enlist the help of the deity Sendell, a cross between a human embryo and Casper the Friendly Ghost, to keep the descending powers from obliterating all that is cherished and familiar.

At a glance, *Twinsen's Odyssey* appears to be very much like its predecessor, and actually, it is. They kept what was good, enhanced it, added a lot of window dressing, and the result is one of the most entertaining games so far of 1997. Players will find themselves in a highly action-packed adventure, with fabulous characters, challenging puzzles and breathtaking graphics. I estimate well over 60 hours of gameplay – less for sharpshooters with a walkthrough, more for the arcadely-challenged. In fact, *severely* arcadely-challenged folks might want to pass on this, as at least half of the gameplay consists of running, jumping, aiming, shooting, rolling, pummeling and, of course, dying. Most of the puzzles consist of physical obstacles – a few mazes and a lot of "how to get there from here" predicaments, accompanied by an occasional member of the "find object A to give to person B" variety.

As in *Relentless*, the visual style of the game is truly a delight that might best be described as *Babar Dismantles the Martians* (the as-yet-unconceived and undelivered TV docu-drama). The character animation is very similar (one exception: Twinsen's eyes), with the same four modes of behavior for the protagonist: Regular, a strolling gait allowing him to use objects and talk to other characters; Aggressive, which permits punching, kicking and whirligig swordplay; Discreet, so that he may successfully rob the local 7-11; and Sporty (renamed from Athletic), which produces a *very* amusing walking style, and allows him to run, jump and roll. Behavior change is now available at the touch of a function key, a wonderful improvement. In addition to the whimsical Grobo elephant, rabbibunny and Quetch characters, additional (and peculiar) species have been added: the Mosquibees, with dangling trumpets on their faces, and buzzing voices, are your freedom-fighting rebel allies; the Blafard, many of them miners, are very adept with shovels and pickaxes – especially when aimed at your face; and the Knartas, angry looking sausages with lasers (look for walking dildoes in combat helmets), are laughable but formidable antagonists with an even more formidable arsenal.

Real-time animated 3-D ploygonal characters are combined with wonderfully rich prerendered backgrounds with a handy multi-angle view feature. Although the camera

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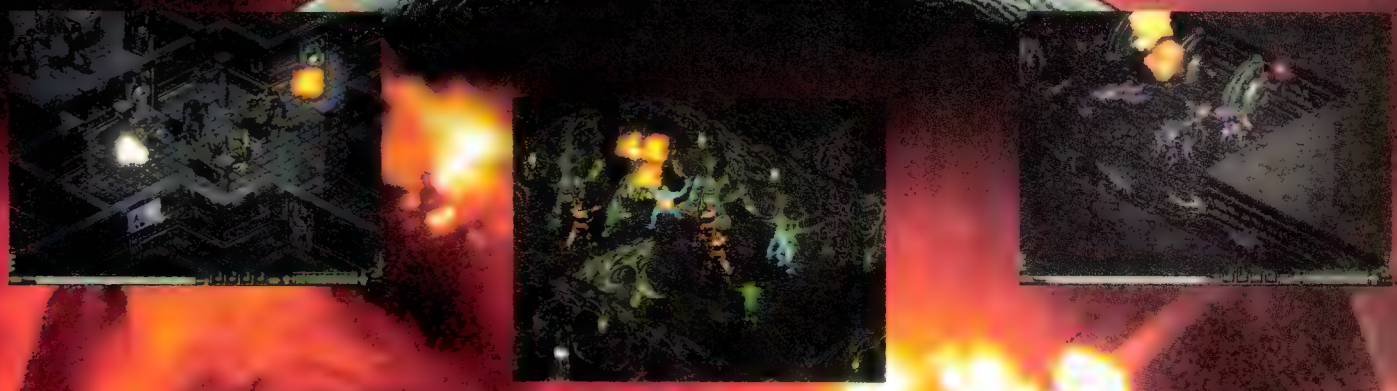

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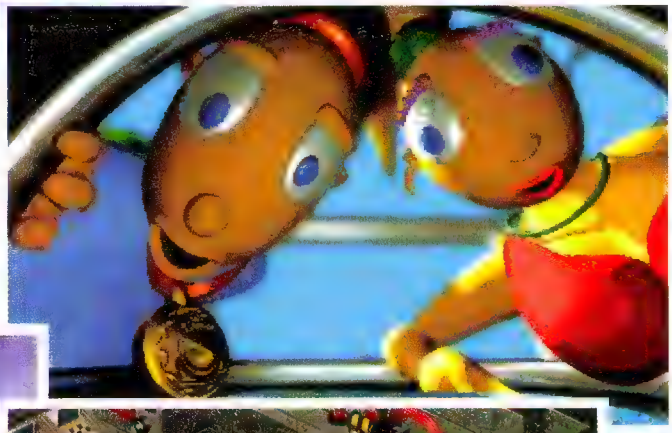

[clockwise from top]

Twinsen and Sendell, together again

Twinsen purposefully approaches the evil televangelist

A view from a pram

The great minds of Twinsun play Follow the Leader

Dino-fly to the rescue

does not follow you, you are able to change it at will for a better perspective. One of the downsides of the multi-view feature is that the camera very often shifts automatically, sometimes at very disadvantageous moments, leaving you under fire with no view of the attackers that were, just a second before, in visual range. Generally, though, you are the master of the view, and it is very helpful to see all possibilities when navigating through some of the more treacherous situations, such as when constantly re-generated steel elephants with clubs are attacking from all sides while additional pachyderms' lasers are hitting you directly in the head (they rarely miss) and missiles are merrily exploding as well; or simply when you need to execute a series of quick leaps onto rapidly passing pads of pumice across seas of molten lava.

In addition to Twinsen's ubiquitous magic ball, other weapons are available: lasers, blowguns and the impeccably tasteful Nitro Meca Penguin – wind him up and he waddles toward the enemy and explodes five seconds later in a grand burst of tuxedo. Weapons are all bestowed upon you after completing various quests, with the exception of the Penguin, which may be purchased at a one of several power-up stores for a few meager zlitos, or kaches, whichever is the local currency – batteries not included, void where prohibited. Power-ups (in the form of health, magic, or extra lives) and cash are also found by using the action key near various plants, barrels, dispensers, etc., or by picking up an occasional mushroom or apple, or by taking part in casino gambling (really!), and they regenerate whenever you leave and return to the area.

While regenerating bonuses might be a plus, regenerating monsters may make you want to keep your analgesic of choice close at hand. Leaving an area by mistake or by the wrong door after spending a perceived million years killing a roomful of angry kielbasi, rewards you with the entire stock of critters all over again (pop a couple of aspirin). Carefully acquired keys do not accumulate. Instead they disappear the moment you leave the area for which they are intended, necessitating that you battle anew for them each time (pop some Advil); even doors that have been opened become re-locked (pop a valium). Unlimited save opportunities ease the burden, provided you remember to use them.

In addition to walking, running, jumping, hopping and rolling, navigation has several other sources. Twinsen can tool around in his sporty little car on Desert Island (at least until the land mines arrive later in the game), and since bodies of water are a problem for our hero (he sings, "…I cannot swim, I cannot float;" he also *cannot sing*), it becomes necessary to fly or boat. His pet Dino-fly, a jet-pack, space shuttles, air ferry, and lava pirogue all provide transportation between the various game locations – in terrific looking cut scenes. During bipedal navigation, there were a few graphics glitches, such as falling through objects, or becoming "stuck in a holding pattern."

The voice acting is a mixed bag, from the truly charming (Zoe, Sendell and Twinsen himself), to the mildly annoying (many of the lesser characters); and the sound track, while not particularly innovative, is pleasant, enjoyable and appropriate, with multiple themes associated with multiple activities. The Discreet Mode theme is sure to bring a smile to many faces.

Aside from the tiny quibbles, this is an extremely engaging title and an absolute must for action-adventure lovers. And to think that all of this joy can be found on a single CD… Although it is a *very* long game, it is recommended that you stick with it until the climax which is very exciting and the dénouement – the final cut scene, which is quite a feast (literally). And you'll be able to view Zoe without her jumpsuit. Hey, stop it! You know very well what that implies. What we *don't* know is whether or not it was twinsons (possessive homonym *not* implied).
–Cindy Yans

★★★★½

Twinsen's Odyssey
Activision • www.activision.com •
Requirements: DOS, 486 DX4/100 or higher, 8MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM; Windows 95, 90MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM
Multiplayer: None

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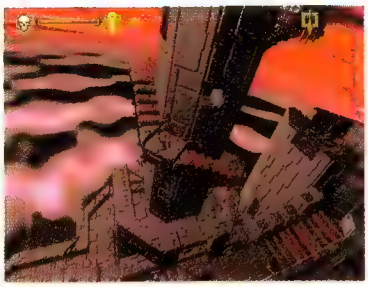
Ecstatica II

It has a lot of balls, but falls apart in the end



[clockwise from top]

The incredible environments never cease to amaze

Lower the bridge to more areas of extreme weirdness

Falling to your death never looked so good

Taking a drink after a particularly nasty battle

Up close and personal with our hero. Sorry ladies – unlike the first game, you'll be playing this one in drag

Traditional adventure gamers beware; *Ecstatica II* takes a decidedly non-traditional approach to almost every convention you hold dear. It has real-time combat, regenerating monsters (kill 'em off, they reappear again, and again, and again…), a somewhat non-linear structure that gives little in the way of hints and direction, an almost comically complex control scheme, and perhaps most damning of all, a timed end segment that practically ruins the entire game. How you sit on the fence of most of these issues will go a long way toward determining whether or not this game is your cup of tea. Oh, and it also has balls. Lots of balls.

Those balls, called ellipsoids, are used to compose everything in the game. Characters are made from balls. Plants are made from balls. Grass textures are made from balls. Like the original game, the sense of artistic consistency is the game's biggest strength. The enormous environments are brilliantly designed, and jaw-droppingly gorgeous. Everything feels like it's been conceptualized as a unified whole, something that's rare in most of today's hodgepodge "be everything to everyone" games. Kudos to the graphic designers – this may be the best looking game of the year.

The story is a bit confusing, or possibly irrelevant, consisting of you controlling a prince who's trying to return to his ancestral castle, only to find it overrun by some demon-spawn that were accidentally summoned by a sorcerer. In typical adventure game logic, you'll have to find seven pieces of a holy seal in order to save all of mankind. Gameplay-wise, *Ecstatica II* is much like its predecessor, which means that both of you in the US who actually bought it should be familiar with its gameplay mechanics. For the rest of you, it's a third-person action/adventure with a "cinematic" view of the action.

Taking a page from the *Alone in the Dark*, "why show a location from one angle when you can show it from six artistic views," it suffers, like most games like it, from "sucky camera angle syndrome." You'll know you've suffered from it when you're under attack at close range and, when you take a step back, you find yourself a tiny speck in the corner of a different enormous scene. The monster, who no doubt isn't aware of the sudden shift of perspective, will continue to beat you senseless while you're trying to get your bearings straight. But it looks fab…

The main criticism of the original *Ecstatica* was its length, or lack thereof, and *Ecstatica II* has addressed this by adding a larger environment to explore, more puzzles and, in what is sure to be a controversial move, added more monsters to fight. And they never stop coming at you. Kill everything in one area, leave the room, come back, and it'll again be full of spiders and zombies and golems, oh my!

A new combat interface has been designed, and it's way too complicated. There are separate commands for swimming or running when armed with or without a weapon (different for a magic or non-magic weapon) and when you do or don't have personal magic. Or any combination thereof. Got that? Trying to keep this straight is ultimately a waste of time, because most beasts can be defeated with a few rolls left or right (to dodge missile weapons) and endless repetition of "stab" and "swipe." But the animation of your character looks fab…

Ultimately, these problems can be dealt with. You'll develop a rhythm in combat, find some better weapons, and ultimately slaughter your way through rooms with ease. What is harder to swallow is the terrible endgame. The final level is on a timer (which is hidden and unknown by the user, until you inexplicably die), and you have to navigate a series of trap-filled mazes, one more annoying than the other. The controls suddenly turn mushy, perhaps due to the frame-rate hit that the slightly more animated levels incur, or due to a fundamental problem with the purely keyboard-based control system. Regardless, it's not fun, and the end-level sorcerer is a real wimp.

Ecstatica II is an infuriating game, not because it's poorly done but because it could have been so much better. It has design flaws that are difficult, though not impossible, to overlook. It moves from being wildly brilliant and twisted to infuriating all in the span of a few minutes, but with most games eliciting nary a reaction in one way or the other, an occasional bit of twisted brilliance is enough. *–Steve Bauman*

★★★½☆

Ecstatica II

Psygnosis • www.psygnosis.com • Requirements: DOS, Windows 95, 60MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 2X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: None

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Betrayal In Antara

Outposts' new roommate?

Career counseling consultants regularly advise you to tailor your résumé so that it tastefully stands out, often by suggesting colored paper. The reason is simple: In a stack of white paper, anything eye-catching or unique tends to be noticed, especially by eyes weary of reading "Went to Yale. References upon request" for the umpteenth time.

Oddly, it's this same lack of distinctiveness that keeps *Betrayal In Antara* from becoming the next great role-playing game. From start to finish, the game does everything by the book, never straying off into the dangerous world of "something new." Omniphobiacs will rejoice, and call this game home.

At the outset, though, things look promising. Following in the footsteps of its predecessor *Betrayal at Krondor*, this game re-introduces, in a thundering encore performance, most of the popular features in the original. A crude but workable introduction sparks your sense of adventure as it presents its hero, young Aren – stable boy by day, and... uh, stable boy by night. During a routine fishin' mission, Aren discovers hidden magical abilities when he decimates a carnivorous fowl by flailing his hands, closing his eyes, and most likely wetting his trousers. Through the course of his journey, Aren will be joined by various cast members, all of whom resemble Buffy, Jody, Mr. French, or a genetic combination thereof.

[clockwise from top right]

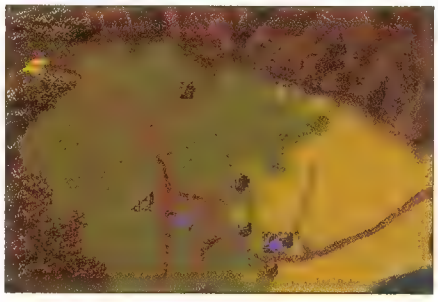
My thoughts, exactly

A little "Leather Jerkin", and you too might have a wooden staff

"Antara: Vacation Capitol of the World." Call your travel agent for details

The overview map looks good with the air-brushed painting look

Laura Croft, Lara's "less perky" sister, stands ready night and day by the well



The freedom of movement that made *Krondor* stand out among its peers remains a strong component. Players can explore the highways and by-ways at will, without being rigidly corralled towards the next designated quest. Best of all – remember those word puzzle chests scattered about the landscape? The ones responsible for stumping the masses, forcing players to rifle through nearby *Trivial Pursuit* cards for answers? They're back, better and tougher than ever.

Since Sierra had over three years to refine and polish, one might expect to see newer technology brought to the development table, as well as a fresh new story line filled with the same kinds of twists and turns rampant in *Krondor*. Not so. With rare exception, little improvement has been made to the portions of the game that count. Worse, critical aspects actually take a step *backward*. A classic example of this is when the party stumbles on a farmhouse surrounded by a knee-high picket fence. Is the solution to jump over? Nope. Climb under? Colder. Break it down? Cold. A Sherman tank manned by postal workers couldn't dent the fence, because the aging technology of the 3D engine forbids it. The absurdity of being forced to find the "prescribed method" for getting into the farmhouse shows what minimal effort really went into bringing *Antara* up to date from a technical perspective.

It's not too subtle a clue that *something* is amiss when a story designed to powerfully stir the emotions of gamers instead elicits groans and chuckles. Characters throughout the game aren't endearing or convincing in any sense. Given the strain with which voice-overs try to overcompensate for the dry or campy dialogue, most of the conversations wind up an endurance test to see how long gamers can survive the barrage of clichés, amateurish accents, and just plain moments of awkwardness. Even the slightest signs of absorption into the game are promptly stifled upon exposure to such gripping phrases as "Laaaaaura.... I think... I can do... maaaaagic!" In a Python skit? Hilarious. In a $50 RPG? Pathetic.

Combat is the whetstone on which to sharpen the wits and reflexes, as well as gain veteran experience needed to wreak havoc in the name of (insert favorite moral alignment here). Placing a finger on exactly what combat lacks in this game isn't easy. On the surface, all the major de facto functions for hacking, slashing, and casting spells work soundly. Perhaps the problem is just that: they're standard, shoulder-shrugging "So?" features, looking for a soul mate but *finding* a bare cupboard with tiny uncaring Welchkins holed up inside.

Every T is crossed. Every I is dotted. The résumé glistens with perfect spelling and grammar. The things gamers *expect* an RPG to possess reside firmly within *Betrayal In Antara*... but nothing more. If only Sierra had switched to that marble-textured paper, or neon pink with tassels; Heck, if they'd just hocked a loogie on the proverbial paper – *anything* to draw attention – the game might have stood out among its peers. In its present state, *Antara* is just a well-qualified, nameless candidate vying for space on your game shelf.

–Tim Royal

★★☆☆☆

Betrayal In Antara

Sierra • www.sierra.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 486 DX4/100 or higher, 16MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM

Multiplayer: None

Exile III: Ruined World

Back to the surface

A non-animated party icon in the valley

The first two games in the award-winning *Exile* shareware series were graphic throwbacks to the time when *Ultima IV* ruled the role-playing universe. It was a time when how a game *played* was more important than how it *looked*. Gameplay is still featured over graphics in Jeff Vogel's latest release, the fantasy role-playing game *Exile III: Ruined World*, even though its graphic look is a bit more sophisticated than the other two *Exiles'*. All the backgrounds and the monster and character icons have been upgraded. The interface has been completely redesigned and many of the game's battle effects are now animated (one can see arrows or spells move through space to strike their targets). The game looks and plays better in many ways but it still lacks character and monster icon animation.

In *Exile III*, as in Vogel's other two role-playing adventures, players still move a non-animated party icon across two-dimensional terrains. During battles, the party icon disappears and individual icons for each of the player's characters appear along with non-animated monster icons. The icons and terrains are more detailed and professionally drawn now, but they still need to be animated. At least the arms and legs of the character and monster icons should move. We should also be allowed to see the characters wear and wield the armor and weapons with which they are equipped.

The *Exile* series is about an underground world (called Exile) where enemies of the surface world (called Empire) are exiled to live out their lives in a huge series of caverns. In *Exile III*, the player's party is sent to the surface. The game is open-ended, allowing players to pretty much explore the world and its hundred different towns and dungeons as they will. The player doesn't even have to send his party on adventures, the story still evolves around them. Villages are destroyed, characters die, monsters gain territory and refugees move from town to town even if the player chooses to do nothing but odd jobs and buy a house.

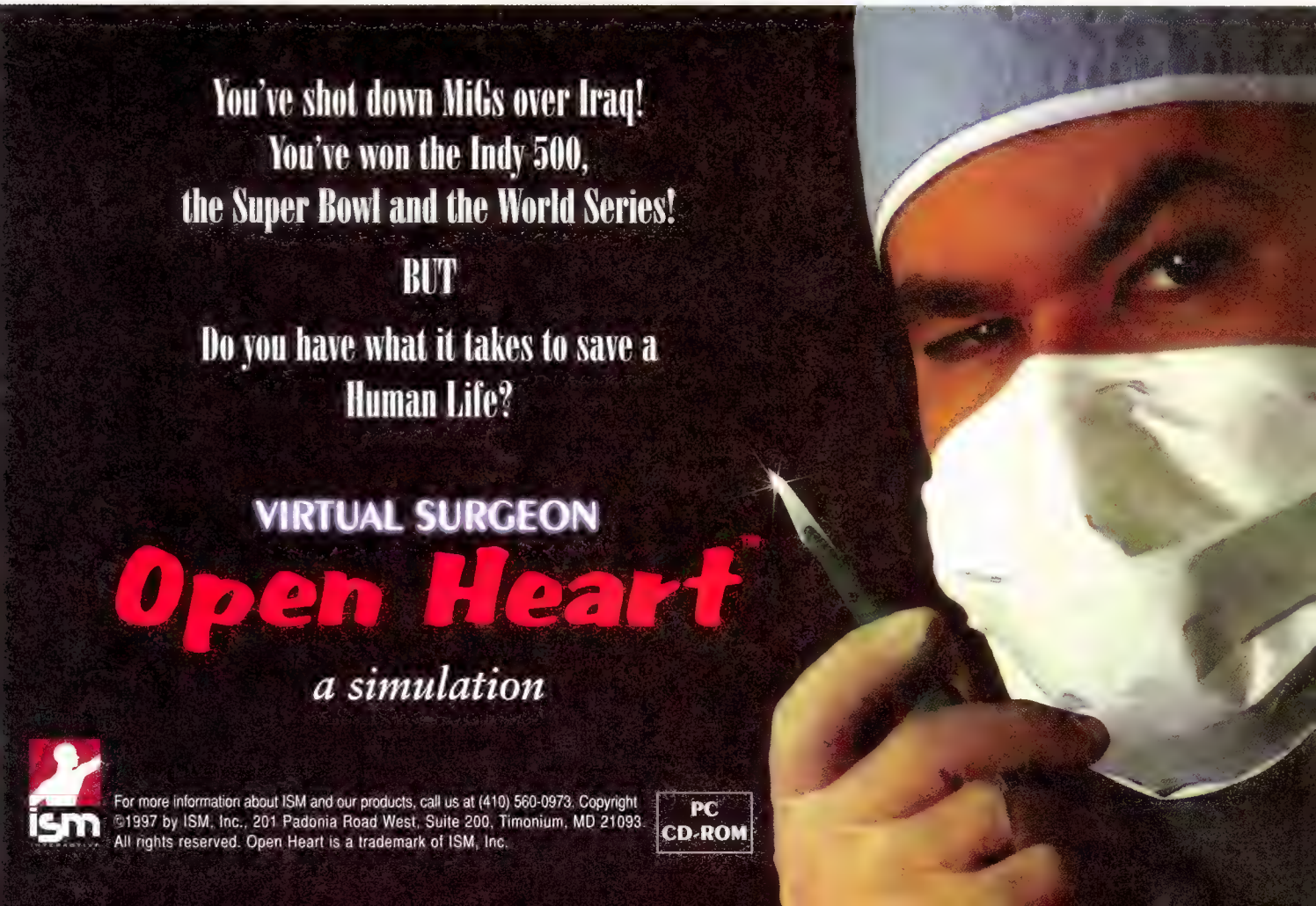
The game allows players to create their own characters or use an already rolled party. There is even a character editor so players can modify party members by giving them more gold, food, spells, skills or items. There's even on-line documentation available as well as the usual printed instruction manual and hint booklet.

Exile III is a superior role-playing game that it is, in spite of its lack of animation, competitive with more graphically sophisticated commercial products. Players will spend many happy hours within its detailed environments, adventuring and role-playing to their heart's content. —Andy Backer

★★★★☆

Exile III

Spiderweb Software, Inc. • www.spidweb.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 2.5MB of free memory; MacOS, System 7, 13" screen • Multiplayer: None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PC CD-ROM

The Hangar

Preflight checklist: Save time, save money; and avoid the Christmas rush

Got a spare $1000 laying around? With two dozen new flight sims inbound, it'll take that much to buy them all. Few will want to own every new flying program that gets airborne; not all will be worth having. Sprinkled throughout this crop of potential chartbusters there will inevitably be some unmitigated losers.

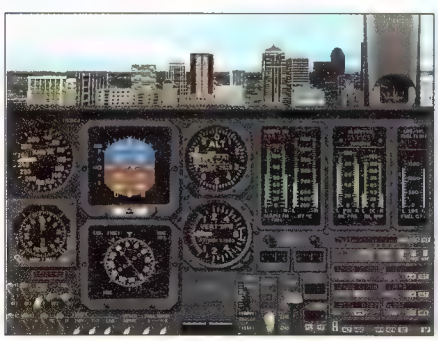
[clockwise from above] A Cobra takes out a SAM in Flying Nightmares 2. Accurately modeled fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft coupled with a wargame feature. Who could ask for anything more?; Red Baron II finally takes off but it is leaving 3D support and multiplayer capability back in the hangar. Despite these omissions, it's regal heritage alone will make it worth a look; Here's a beautiful introductory screen from Air Warrior II. You'll see these before playing the new, strategically-oriented, automated, historical scenarios. They're easy to join and leave you muttering "This is what it must have been like" when you're milling around over the rally beacon with 100 other B-17's!; X-Fighters from Sierra pushes the flight sim envelope with ambitious gameplay features. Your personal, squadron and country performance will affect the mission types and your ability to design, produce and fly new aircraft

Be patient, Grasshopper, and have a fast CPU with a 3D card

The real question is how to pick a few that will provide long, interesting gameplay. Sure, read all the reviews and download the available demos. Wiser pilots still don't give in to the urge to be the first on the block to own the newest, highly-touted, "best ever" flight simulation. They wait and watch the usenet. There are plenty of opinions about game quality and bugs available in the comp.sys.ibm.pc.games.flight-sim news group. It doesn't take long for a clear winner to emerge. As added insurance, look for a store that lets you return a program; there are still a few around.

Before the first wave rolls in, consider your hardware. If you're not running a Pentium in the 120-133Hz range, minimum, you're going to be disappointed with the performance of most new sims. SSI's *Su-27 1.5* is an exception; it's playable on a strong 486. Flanker is a good game that doesn't waste CPU cycles. If only others would be so careful when coding… The Pentium II appears to be the winner for floating-point intensive flight sims, so start budgeting for one.

Secondly, 3D is here; embrace it. About 80% of the current inbound releases support 3D. After this wave, expect that to rise to 100%. The 3D accelerators carry much of the graphics load. A relatively small investment in a new 3D card can prolong the life of a older, slower Pentium CPU. There's no escape; if you aren't using a fast Pentium with a top flight 3D card, upgrade before jumping into the new games.



Sierra's Pro Pilot will up the ante in the civilian sim sweepstakes. The cockpits are detailed and the instrument panel controls don't require the arcane key combos so common in Flight Simulator

Two dozen! How will I ever decide?

The software itself simplifies the purchasing decision. Games can loosely be divided into "era" categories. Start your search in your field of interest. There are WWI, WWII, Korea and the "Beyond Visual Range" jet combat games on the way and "civilian" aviation programs too. Look for companies that are trying to "raise the bar" and improve the genre in some way. The "graphics glitter" is nice but it's time for some substance. Virgin's *Sabre Ace* and *MiG Alley* from Empire spotlight the overlooked Korean era, providing jet combat without the "magic missiles". Potentially these present a "best of both worlds" situation that expands our simulation envelope. Similarly, Sierra's *Pro Pilot* may prove a worthy challenger to *Flight Simulator*, adding much more detail to the real-world flight training benefits of simulation. *Flying Nightmares 2* from Eidos and *X-Fighters* from Sierra incorporate wargaming aspects along with simulation. This could be a major innovation.

Don't be satisfied with less than "standard features;" demand more. At this stage in the development of flight simulations, any game should provide more than standalone capability. Multiplayer features, by modem, network or Internet, add to the useful life of any sim. Without them, a game automatically loses some desirability. The same is true of dynamic campaign engines. It's true that some pre-scripted, unchanging campaigns have proven to be very well done. It's also true that a few dynamic engines haven't worked particularly well. Still, dynamic engines should provide more for your money. The variability in defenses and mission paths keep you playing long after your first successful pass through the game.

In the multiplayer Internet arena, strategic considerations in gameplay are long overdue; the endless furballing is becoming a bore. For far too long, climbing to 25K in a FW-190 has passed for "strategy." Kesmai is moving *Air Warrior II* in a "strategic" direction. They recently tested an 8th Air Force "Big Week" automated scenario. About 450 players recreated a major historical event in the air war over Europe. The scoring was reversed with Country score as primary, Squadron secondary and Individual least important. This type of gameplay should be encouraged. *Confirmed Kill* is also rumored to be mission oriented. Others will follow this lead. *Warbirds* seems focused on technological improvements; voice capability exists. You can talk to your fellow squaddies while in flight. It's bound to become another "must have" feature.

Without a doubt, whatever succeeds will be over-imitated. Remember all the *Doom* clones and derivatives? Buy carefully, because you're voting with dollars.
–John Nolan

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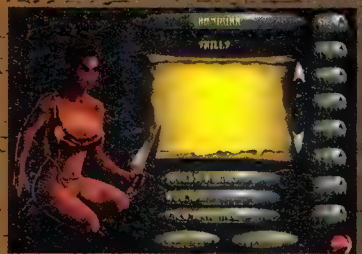

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Air Combat Advisor

Moving from the BnZ for the Kills

When it comes to killing bandits, sticking to BnZ exclusively will yield relatively few kills in relation to flight time, and – depending on your skill – ammo expenditure and TnB fighting in general. It's very easy to understand why when you consider that the tradeoffs made for your increased safety as the BnZ'er also works against you. The high speeds that are characteristic of BnZ attacks reduce the targeting "window of opportunity" (duration) for both yourself and the bandit. As we've touched on a bit last time, if you want to increase your kill-to-bullet ratio, you're going to have to turn with the bandit sometime. (Of course that's assuming that the bandit values his airplane enough to evade your attack with by turning as opposed to flying straight and level like a target drone for you.)

If you've ever attempted to turn with a bandit and had less than satisfactory results, you probably realize the secret to success is knowing when it's relatively good (read: safe) to do so. At this point we already know that part of this decision should be based on knowing the capabilities of your aircraft vs. that of your opponent, and E is more valuable than gold in combat. Let's move on and talk a little about how to recognize when favorable turning opportunities arise.

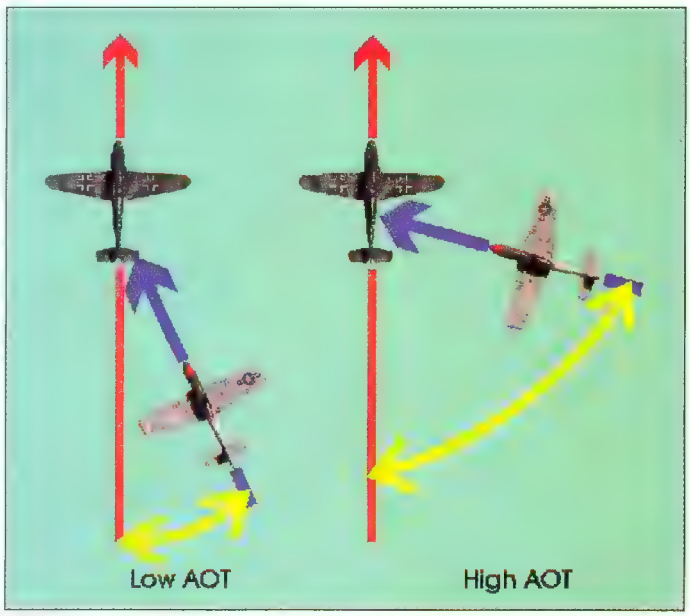
Shoot 'em in the back

The best shot in air combat against a fighter is the H2T (Head to Tail) shot. This is because you get to a place where shoot at the bandit and, more importantly, where he can't shoot at you; you don't need to lead your target as much to shoot at it and you can see what the bandit is doing so evasion becomes more difficult for him. Although attacking an unsuspecting fighter from the rear is most desirable position, you'll rarely get the opportunity for such attacks without some effort on your part or blunder from your enemy. Nevertheless, if a bandit presents the opportunity, take it.

Angle off tail

The first thing you want to look for is a low Angle Off Tail (AOT). AOT is the angle of your flight path compared to that of the bandit. Realize that AOT applies even if both aircraft are not on the same dimensional plane (above or below vs. left or right), but the nose of your airplane doesn't need to point at the target to calculate AOT. AOT is based on flight paths, but in relation to the bandit's tail (hence the name).

Zero degrees is directly behind the bandit. This is the most desirable and easiest shot because no deflection shooting is required. The higher your AOT, the higher angle of deflection shot is required to hit your target. Note that depending on the distance from your target, the higher your AOT, the higher your deflection shot angle must be to land your BBs (slang for gun rounds) because you must pull lead.

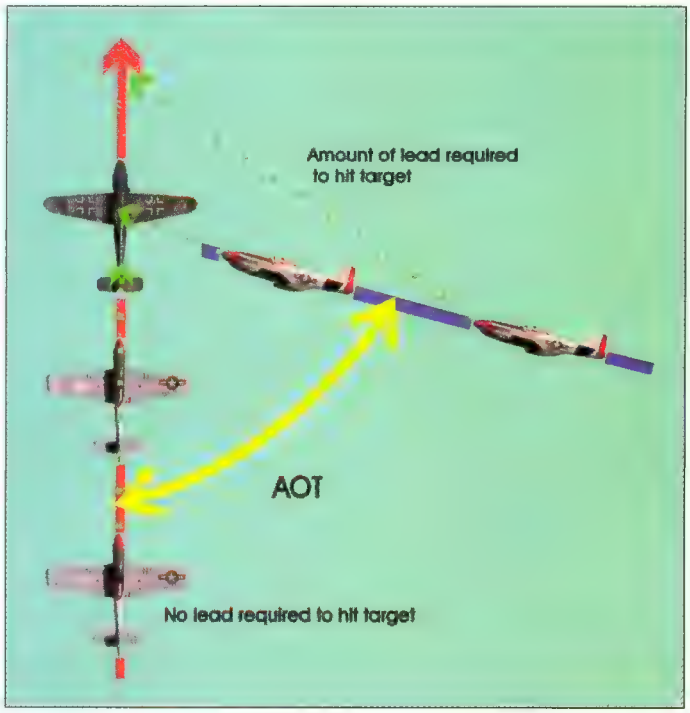


AOT is the angle of your flight path compared to that of the other aircraft. A lower AOT is preferable to a higher AOT because it requires a smaller angle of deflection to shoot the bandit

Hit 'em when they're down

If you have a good AOT situation presented to you that's great, but AOT isn't everything. In addition to weighing the situation based on your aircraft performance and E state relative to your opponent's, you need to consider how much E your opponent has in relation to his flying performance as well. Just the fact that you're speeding down on your opponent automatically suggests that you have the E advantage already (you shouldn't have begun a BnZ attack if you didn't start with an E advantage). But if his E state places him low on the turn performance curve, this can negate any skill or aircraft turn performance advantage he'd normally have under other conditions. For example, if a bandit is virtually stalled (well below his corner speed), even though his skill/airplane may still be able to out-turn you in this condition, he may be slow enough for you to kill him before he can turn or do anything about it.

Next time we'll talk about and how to recognize such situations and how to deal with them. Until then remember – it's better to watch your own tail than to fixate on the tail of your opponent. *–Ben Chiu*



The higher your AOT and the longer the distance from your target, the more deflection angle must be to used to hit your target

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688(I) Hunter/Killer

All dressed up and nowhere to go

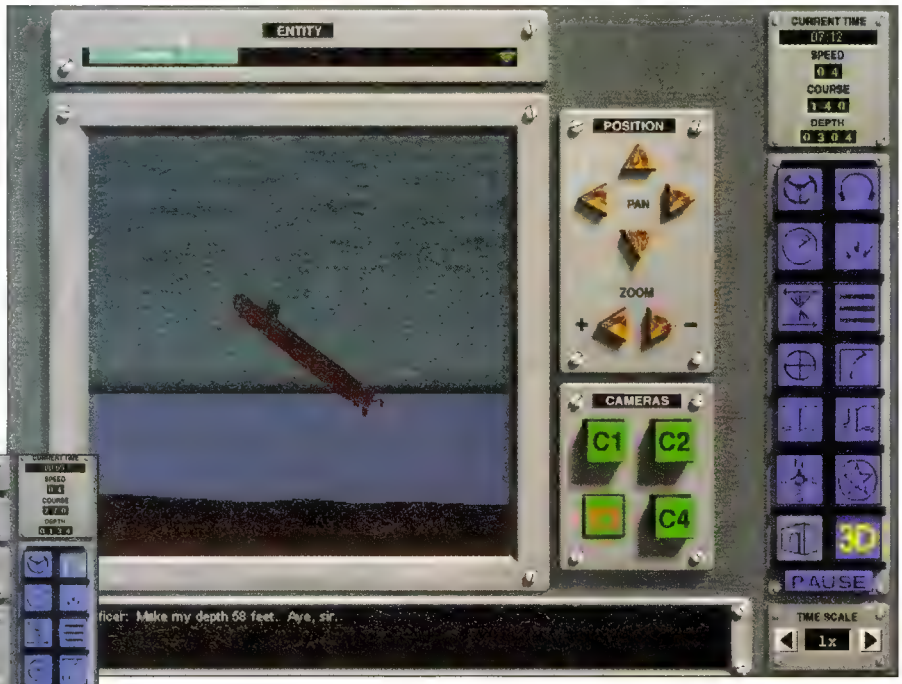
As the 1990s wind down, and the "peace dividend" from the end of the Cold War pushes talented purveyors of Department of Defense software into the entertainment field (Stanley Associates, MÄK, for instance), Electronic Arts has released its third foray into the modern submarine simulation field, *688(I) Hunter/Killer*. Part of the Jane's Combat Simulations line, which already includes the classic *Longbow* and *ATF* flight sims, *688(I)* is the work of Sonalysts, Inc., yet another military contractor looking for greener pastures beyond the Pentagon. Bringing their considerable knowledge of submarine sonars, information processing technology, and undersea operations to the table, Sonalysts has created what is probably the best, most accurate, and most sophisticated modern sub sim ever. Unfortunately, this in many ways superb effort is much less successful as a submarine game.

[clockwise from top]

The mission editor allows you to place Advanced Whales on the map...are their Intermediate Whales too?

3D views are usually adequate, and can sometimes be tactically (if unrealistically) useful

The heart of the game, the broadband sonar display. No one does this better



The game's strengths are notable. True to their name, the developers of *688(I)* have focused on the sonar systems in the Improved Los Angeles-class attack submarine. Unlike most sub games, where contact leads to classification and a firing solution in short order, *688(I)* makes gamers work at the task. Computer-controlled crewmen are available, of course, and they do a good job, but true silicon submariners will want to do this on their own. Using the bow-mounted spherical array, and the versatile if quirky towed array, simulated sonar operators have to find, monitor, identify, and track targets in the sometimes cacophonous undersea environment. Audio cues are vital in this game; whales sing, propellers churn, torpedoes whir, and it all means something. Once a target is acquired, gamers have to use narrow band sonars, including a hull-mounted array, to match up discrete ship sounds with stored profiles of likely encounters. Then, to accurately gauge speed, players become DEMON worshippers, using the DEModulatedNoise display to track shaft and propeller noise and thus determine contact speed. All of this feeds into the Target Motion Analysis (TMA) system, where the player attempts to accurately fix contacts in space and time, which is essential to making effective attacks.

No argument possible, the sonar system in *688(I)* is superb. The rest of the game is less stellar, however, and that is the central dilemma of this simulation. It is far and away the best simulation of certain aspects of modern submarine operations; its sonar and targeting models are superb, and it is better than any other game in simulating the tension and difficulty of stalking targets underwater. The rest of the package, though, is a very mixed bag. The set of targets and possible encounters is limited, with a host of important naval vessels conspicuously absent (planned for a later update it seems, along with ice pack scenarios). Weapons loadouts are sparse, with no ship attack versions of cruise missiles, no possible future systems such as stand-off ASW weapons, and no tactical nukes, which while no longer carried on most deployments are still in the arsenal. The 3D views, while incredibly atmospheric in their feel, are populated by modeled objects of only middling sophistication and attractiveness. Land is featureless, the ocean rather consistently placid, and the animation sparse and unimpressive.

All of that is forgivable, even forgettable; rarely does any of this interfere with enjoying the game. What is much more problematic, however, is the basic mission structure of *688(I)*, and the apparent priorities of the designers. The game comes with 7 training missions, 11 single missions, and a campaign of 15 missions in four different operating areas. There is a scenario editor, so user-created scenarios should begin to emerge soon, but the default mission selection is bit skimpy, and the missions are uneven. Some are very good, and require great skill. Others are merely navigation exercises. And there is

little variability within these missions. Play it once, play it a thousand times, and there will be little change. Once gamers have won most of these missions, they will not be back for more any time soon. The campaign is more of the same. It has video lead-ins, four separate geographical areas and themes, and some good scenarios, but it is just as fixed and immutable as the single missions. Nothing the player does has any effect on the progression of the campaign, except that failure means replaying a mission.

Apparently, one villain here is the Internet. EA seems convinced that their resources are best directed towards making *688(I)* an Internet institution, rather than building a dynamic campaign. Like EA's earlier sub games (*688*, *Seawolf*), *688(I)* offers multiplayer support, this time via networks, serial connection, or the Internet. While the idea of linking players over the 'Net sound good in theory, it is a bit less useful in practice. Internet support is buggy, with error messages and crashes common (probably some relic of DirectPlay quirks); once running, it is smooth, at least. There is no time compression in multiplay, so gamers are reduced to either *Quake*-style shootouts to get things over with, or committed to a day-long exercise in patience. Coop play can be fun, but the easy chat mode ruins realism, and wolfpacks of 688 boats are slightly laughable. Still, it is clear that EA has focused more time on multiplayer support than on the solo game, and it hurts. With the editor, it is possible to make some very interesting multiplayer battles, but will anyone have the time to play them? In a sim emphasizing stealth and patience, it is somewhat odd that the only playable multiplayer battles are hip-shoot affairs.

Another villain, of course, is history. The Los Angeles class boats were created to hunt Soviet subs, and secondarily to sink sophisticated surface combatants. With the fall of the USSR, the potential target list for 688 boats is drastically altered. The threat is now diesel subs, a horde of light frigates and corvettes, and shallow water; special ops and special weapons missions have replaced penetrating boomer bastions as major foci of effort. For the gamer, this is not good. Whereas pitched battles along the GIUK gap made for great gameplay in the 1980s, whacking Iranian oil platforms or Columbian drug smugglers in the 1990s is far less satisfying. Jane's cannot change history, of course, but they and Sonalysts could at least have come up with some interesting campaign ideas that would have provided worthy foes. The Chinese? Japanese? Indians? Absent in *688(I)*, but all three made interesting foes in other naval games.

[clockwise from top]

Radio and ESM station. A good place to take a peek at what's up top, electro-magnetically speaking

Target Motion Analysis, the heart of tactical planning

Snapshots turn into range-finding tools at the periscope station. Such realism is a strength of 688(I)

A decided lack of imagination pervades its game elements, to the detriment of the overall product.

Subs are solitary hunters. Sub gamers are solitary players, to a large degree. Intricate, detailed, complex dynamic campaigns are what sub gamers want, much like flight sim jocks. Sure, online air war games are successful, but not nearly as much as standalone sims, and gamers have demanded dynamic campaigns from sim developers on a consistent basis since the early days of *Falcon AT*. Sub gamers would love to have online campaigns, with real humans playing not only subs, but surface ships, aircraft, and the like. Apparently unable or unwilling to escape the arcade roots of games like the original *688*, EA is devoting its resources perfecting something that, frankly, is hard to imagine anyone really wants: tournament-style submarine free for alls on the 'Net. A mixture of hard-core realism (sonar, TMA, no God's-eye displays) with casual disregard for accuracy (incredible turn rates and reload times, genius Third World ASW operators, recon by fire using the 3D views) is puzzling at best. Much more desirable than spiffy Internet rumbles would be a real campaign, variable and random missions, and more weapons, platforms, targets, to play with. At least, you *can* save anytime you want in this game....

Verdict? Sub fans will want it; it's professionally done, and basically enjoyable, especially with the mission editor. It is not the holy grail of sub games some have been anticipating, however. The essence of what makes a submarine simulation fun is the unknown. Setting off on a patrol in *Silent Hunter* or *Aces of the Deep*, you have no idea what to expect. Could be an enemy task force, fast and deadly; could be a fat, lumbering tanker, oblivious to the war until your torpedoes send it to a watery grave. Simulated days of cruising might pass uneventfully, until one moonless night you encounter that elusive carrier making a run for its anchorage. Jane's has ignored this in *688(I)*. There is no feeling of discovery, no sense of voyaging into the unknown. To quote from *Jesus Christ Superstar*, "Everything is fixed, and you can't change it." Even RSR tied the player's actions to a fictional land war in Europe, so that mission success or failure affected more than an efficiency report. More importantly, other sub games offer new discoveries and challenges with every game; *688(I)*'s missions seem more of a preparation for EA and Jane's beloved Internet play than anything else. As good as it is in some areas, this is one boat that could still benefit from a refit.
–Robert Mayer

★★★½☆

688(I) Hunter/Killer
Jane's Combat Simulations • www.janes.ea.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 90MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-8 players, Internet, LAN, modem

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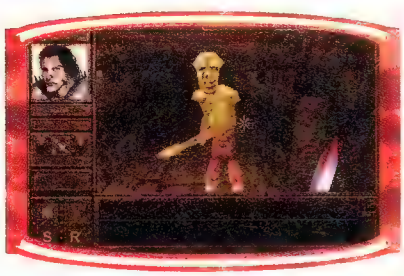

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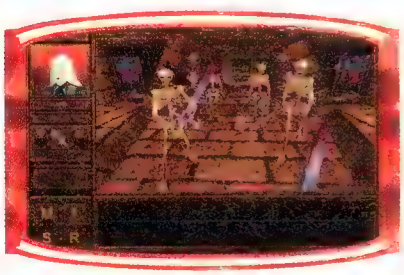

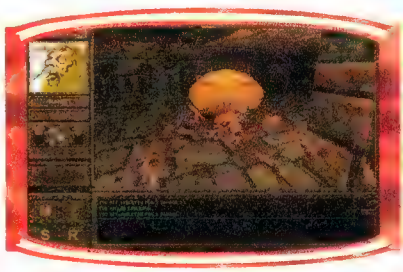

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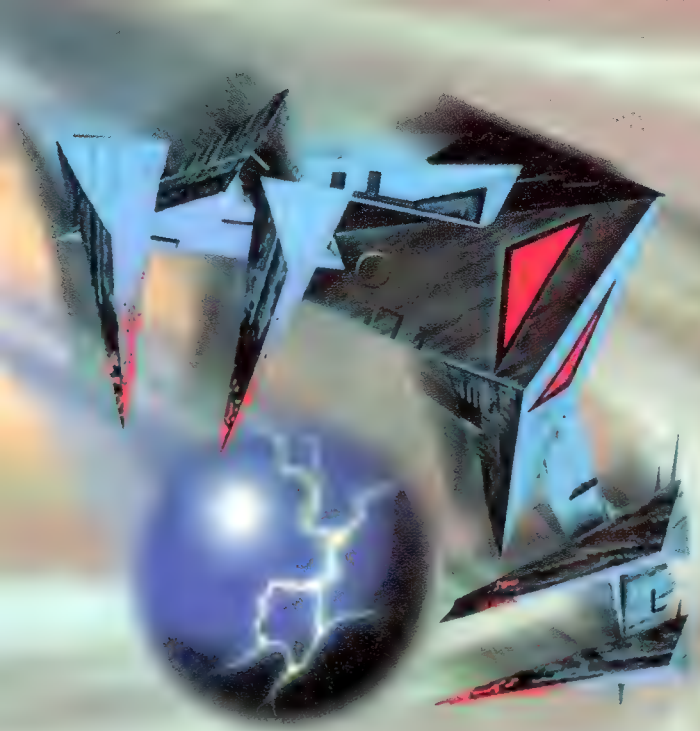

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iF-22

I-Magic's first internally-developed sim trundles down the runway

"Fox Two Toothpaste," quipped an amused player on the Internet, referring to the solid smoke trails behind missiles

Early on, 3D acceleration looked like it would be the redemption of flight simulators, the magic bullet that would give everyone top-notch graphics and fluid framerates. We could have *EF2000*'s lush terrain at *Su-27*'s silky speed and everyone would be happy. But now, riding a wave of first-generation 3D-accelerated sims, Interactive Magic has forced us to wake up and smell the coffee with *iF-22*, a rude awakening for anyone who hopes 3D acceleration has solved the speed vs. graphics debate in flight sims.

The terrain engine in *iF-22* is a textbook example of the hazards of 3D acceleration: it's blurry and indistinct. At low altitudes, the ground features the close-up detail of the French Impressionists. There are no roads and cities are represented by a few scattered houses. The objects themselves look good, but they don't mesh well with the blurry terrain. Bridges, for instance, seem to be situated in the middle of nowhere. Once you zoom out, however, you'll notice they span a dark smudge that looks like a river from 5,000 feet. The argument might be made that this is a high-altitude sim (which it isn't; an F-22 should be able to take advantage of low-altitude terrain masking for stealth). But the ground doesn't look any better from higher up, where it breathes, pulses, and flashes like a mass of angry protoplasm.

One man's shading effect is another man's glare. An Su-25 Frogfoot with glare and without glare. From underneath, you'd never be able to tell that Frogfoots have bright blue underbellies

The solid cloud and smoke effects make for some… interesting graphics. Destroyed ground units seem to sit under giant gray balloons. Missiles and damaged airplanes trail long willowy veils that make them stand out nicely against the smear of terrain below. Whereas lens flare is a trendy lighting flaw to model these days, *iF-22* opts for glare: from certain angles, most objects are solid-black blobs devoid of detail. Between the blurred terrain and the simulated glare, this sim will induce squinting like no other game on the market. To make matters worse, the whole thing is pokey: not unplayable on a 200MHz Pentium, but neither is it fluid. *iF-22* never effectively creates a sense of speed, even at low altitudes.

The real F-22 has only recently seen the light of day, so a lot of guesswork is involved in creating an F-22 sim. One of Interactive Magic's guesses is that the avionics are so sophisticated that a child could operate them. Most information is displayed in bright Fisher-Price colors on MFD's. The F-22's radar is apparently capable of flawlessly ID'ing and returning detailed information on any blip with a simple mouse click, even targets outside the radar's sweep (although you can't get an external view of a target outside a 40 mile range; that wouldn't be fair). It even pinpoints all missiles, radar or IR guided, complete with a solid line tracing the missile's route to its target.

Flying *iF-22* is a lot driving with an automatic transmission: it's missing the complexity one associates with advanced systems and sophisticated machinery. It doesn't offer the sense of satisfaction that comes with mastering *Su-27* or *AH-64D Longbow*. This may be accurate, but that's beside the point. Whether the blame lies with Interactive Magic or Lockheed-Martin, user-friendly can only go so far before it becomes user-bland.

Another problem with this sort of simplicity is its lack of flexibility. For instance, there's no way to focus on a distant area, so it's difficult to make sense of clustered targets. A single universal zoom applies to all MFDs, making it impossible to zoom in while maintaining an overview of the area. And ironically, although the MFDs are the only source of information about damage to your plane, they're liable to fail if a missile so much as gets close to your plane. It's hard to believe the F-22 doesn't have a "Christmas tree" of lights representing the status of the plane's systems. The cockpit warning sounds, which make a PC speaker sound hearty in comparison, are maddening and incessant once you enter enemy territory; it's tempting to turn on in-flight music to drown out that infernal beeping.

The cockpit is fully interactive, which is a nice touch but it's no substitute for hot-keys; many useful commands can only be accessed by dragging the mouse around. It's also fairly simple to accidentally punch Elvis when you're trying to target something on the bottom of the central MFD: an errant twitch while you're clicking will switch the cockpit view, putting your mouse pointer right over the ejection handle, which pulls with a single click (stop laughing; it wasn't funny). The communications suite looks good, but is largely for show. Communication with the ground and control tower are just fluff and only the simplest wingman commands are available. Without more advanced commands or a more flexible sensor suite, you have no way of knowing whether your wingmen are flying with active radar, much less any way of setting up advanced maneuvers like brackets and drags. It's probably a moot point, since one of the most frequent messages you'll hear from your wingmen is "my missile's gone stupid" (translation: "I'm too dumb to fire it correctly"). Furthermore, escorted flights will often fly their course without releasing ordnance, resulting in a failed mission regardless of your performance. Thankfully, the enemy AI is much more competent.

The AWACS link is very well done, though, changing the whole dynamic of the game by giving you a wide view of the area with-

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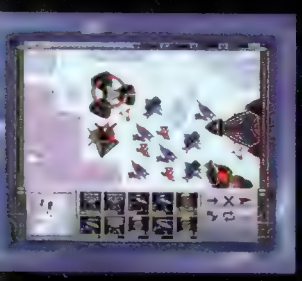

Resource management, import-export, arsenal development and technological research are just a few of the dynamic game play features in this multi-player clash.

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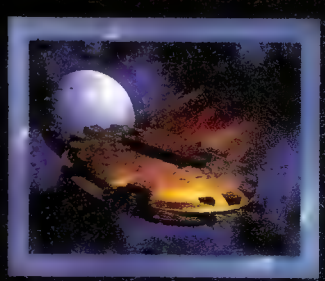

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Your coordinates for take-off are www.microsoft.com/games/fsim

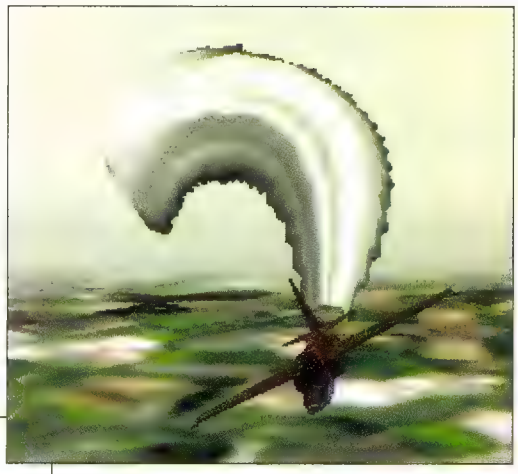
out compromising your stealth. This perspective demonstrates one of the best things about the game: it drops the player into a busy theatre of operations where the radar MFD looks like a petri dish swarming with bacteria. The sky is dotted with friendly and enemy aircraft, particularly over the Ukraine campaign where the Russians put up a fight for air superiority. The ground is littered with enemy units, dozens clustered together at a time. This widespread activity, coupled with *iF-22*'s dynamic campaign, is very nearly enough to recommend it in spite of its flaws. Although the progress of the campaign is only indicated by a shifting front line (oh, for *Tornado*'s detailed campaign reports), there is a tangible effect on the enemy. Pound the Serbs long enough and they won't have any planes in the air, for instance.

Unfortunately, the mission planner doesn't do a very good job of integrating your mission into all this activity. The pre-flight map is a broad satellite image with no practical zoom option for threading through air defenses. Map labels are unreadable because they overlap each other. Waypoint management is coarse and unwieldy. The default schedules are poorly coordinated with escort aircraft. The ground crew apparently enjoys a good joke when it comes to fueling your aircraft: unless you manually check the fuel level, you're liable to find yourself ditching before you even cross into enemy territory. A huge aviation map ships with the game, but there's no explanation for how to read it's Byzantine grid system.

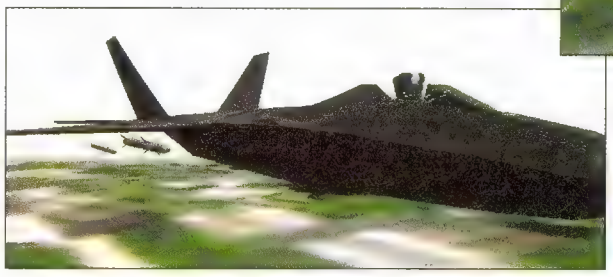
The flight model is solid and reasonable, with the possible exception of rudders that work too well at high speeds. Thrust vectoring allows the F-22 to do some weird high angle-of-attack maneuvering (anyone for sustained flight at a 70 degree AoA?), but otherwise it handles like any high performance jet with respect to roll rates, altitude effects, turning speed, and stalls. The game does have its share of sci-fi hokeyness, such as the psychic wingmen who anticipate your every move, air-to-air missiles that lock onto grounded aircraft, and an autopilot that lets you take a nap while it lands your aircraft.

So given the pros and cons, what's the final analysis? One of the problems is that I-Magic falls far short in comparison to Digital Integration, whose simulation products they distribute. Imagine Shakespeare's literary agent deciding, "Hey, I'm going to write a play myself!" or Orson Welles' producer thinking, "*Citizen Kane*? Pfft. I can make one of those!" In this regard, Interactive Magic's first effort has an almost juvenile "me too!" tenor.

But this is hardly fair. While many of us can't deny this is in the back of our minds as we install and boot up *iF-22*, the game has to be judged on its own merits. So let us don our blindfold and take up the scales. In one bowl, we place the hideous terrain, the questionable graphics, the simplistic (but perhaps accurate) avionics, the hollow communications routine, and the disappointing mission planner. In the other bowl, we place the lively dynamic campaign, the swarm of activity during missions, and the essentially solid flight model.



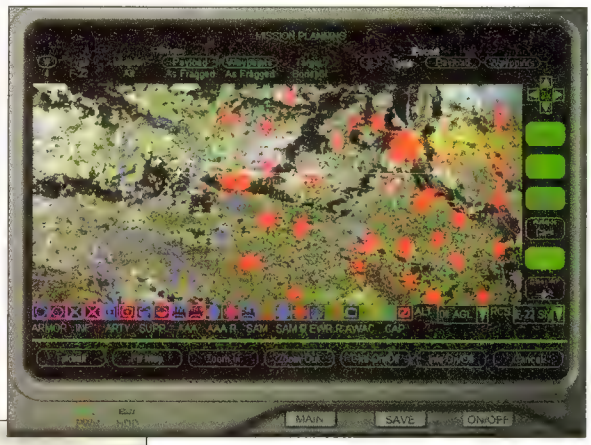
▲ **Smokin'! As damaged planes maneuver, the smoke effects twist into vortices**



◀ **We don't need no stinkin' pylons! Ordnance obediently levitates beneath the F-22's wing until launched**

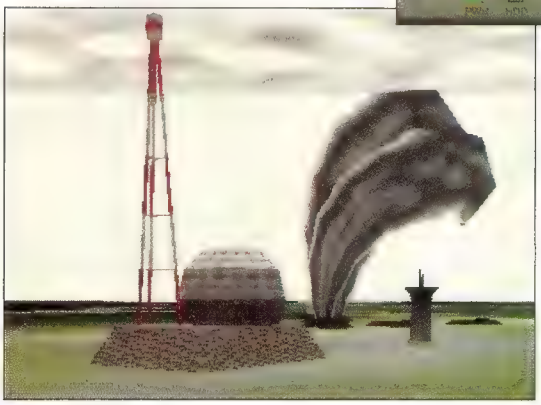
Oh, yes, there's one thing that you can't forget: *iF-22 is* fun. Falling somewhere between the "silly" fun of *USNF* and the "serious" fun of *Su-27*, it should find its own little niche among simmers. In a way, the gameplay brings back fond memories of MicroProse's *F-117* sim. It would be remiss if it wasn't noted how well it works as a multiplayer game, and how enjoyable its Capture the Flag scenario is. It's also hard to deny that more time was spent with the game than was necessary for this review. Although riddled with flaws, it's hard to say in good faith say I'm unhappy with *iF-22*. This is the final and most important item that tips the scales a half star from complete mediocrity and makes *iF-22* a three star sim. –*Tom Chick*

[*For many potential players, F-22 isn't the aircraft's designation, but a reference to the number of times they'll holler the "F" word before getting the game running. Although we had no problems, iF-22 is apparently a stickler for having the latest drivers, specifically in terms of your video card and any CH peripherals you may be using. Without a 60+ megabyte swap file for virtual memory, players are also likely to experience frequent hard drive hits, and thus pauses, during play. If you're having problems getting the game to run well, check the troubleshooting FAQ on Interactive Magic's website.*]



▲ **The mission planner certainly doesn't suffer from a lack of information**

◀ **No, it's not a scene from Twister**



★★★☆☆

iF-22

Interactive Magic • www.imagicgames.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 90MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-8 players, Internet, LAN, modem

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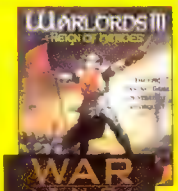

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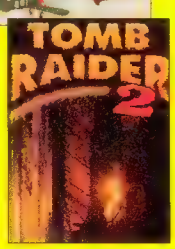

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'THE CURSE OF MONKEY ISLAND' includes all of the elements that made the series great but with a more highly stylized, hi-resolution look. Through an intuitive interface players pick up and use objects and talk to various characters throughout the game.
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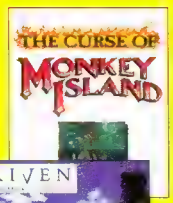

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'MIGHT & MAGIC VI' The Mandate of Heaven, the newest M & M edition contains an integral time clock with multiple plots and story lines. Unique 'skill based' character development and over 1000 miles of virtual terrain!
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'ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS DUNGEON MASTER GUIDE' The essential manual for all information you need to create and run thrilling sword and sorcery adventures. Learn all there is to know about magic spells, hundreds of devices and treasures, battle, travel, and more.
TSR (Pen/Paper RPG)
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'DEFIANCE' Imagine a test mission that turns into reality! First person combat simulator, four levels of firepower, missiles and auxiliary weapons. Twin beam laserlok firing system
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'UNREAL' In one seamless flowing world, race across vast outdoor and indoor environments, enter enchanting cities, and mysterious temples. Use Unreal's easy to use object-oriented level-editor to design your own levels.
GT Interactive (Action)
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'WAR WIND II:HUMAN ONSLAUGHT' A greater variety of vehicular, mechanized and assault units with special abilities, 4 campaign options, 46 scenarios. Multiple leaders with varying strengths add to strategic challenge
Mindscape (Strategy)
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'MAGIC THE GATHERING 5TH EDITION' This deck contains 60 tradable game cards, randomly assorted, plus a rule book. Each player must have a deck. This deck may be enhanced with more cards sold in booster packs.
Wizards of the Coast (Card game)
Release Date: NOW CG $7

'ALBERT ODYSSEY' Legend of Eldean, Masquerade of the Impostor. In this fantasy role playing game, there are up to five characters in your party, you never know what's going to happen. The only way to find out is to play it through.
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'FINAL FANTASY 7' Act out your mercenary dreams while saving the planet. Spectacular animated plot sequences, impressive storyline, three dimensional characters, unprecedented level of detail, great effects.
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LinksLS 98

The evolution of a champion

If you ask any computer golf fanatic to name the top PC golf sims, Access' *Links* series is almost sure to be one of them. The *Links* name has been synonymous with quality golf simulations since its first incarnation and has improved with each new version, the latest being *Links LS 98*. For the first time in years, however, Access has some real competition for the title of "best golf sim".

In line with the *Links* tradition, this is a very impressive game. If you have never played *Links* before, you will be amazed at the overall high quality and attention to detail that Access lavishes on its golf sims. The series has always laid claim to the best graphics in the golf sim world, and *LS 98* once again raises the stakes with beautifully detailed courses, reflecting water, waving flags, blimps, balloons, and airplanes traversing the sky, and all of the little touches such as flying divots that help create the illusion of being on a real course. A new "look ahead" rendering feature has been added to speed up the screen redraw between shots; it's performance appears to vary depending upon the situation. Six modes of play are provided, along with seven animated golfers (including Arnold Palmer) to keep you from getting lonely on those long par 5s.

New to *LS 98* is an off-line tournament mode, similar to that offered by Electronic Arts' *PGA Tour Pro*, in which you can play a full, multi-round tournament (including cuts) against a field of men, women, or even mixed pros. *LS 98*'s tourney mode includes an editor which makes changing the names to the latest PGA or LPGA pros a snap, as well as the ability to modify the skill level of the field (but not the individual golfers). While it is fun to see how you do against a leaderboard that includes Tiger Woods and Greg Norman, the inability to set individual skill levels for the pros reduces it to a bit of a random number generator. Still, knowing that you must make a 20 foot putt on the 18th green to make the cut adds some enjoyable tension to the game.

Throw in multiplayer capability, the ability to use the large library of *Links* courses, and the best ball physics in computer golf and you have a real winner. However, there are a few nits to pick, minor flaws that separate *Links LS 98* from perfection. Game statistics are messed up, reporting nonsensical numbers in some categories. Many people have reported the game frequently ignoring the last "click" in the tri-click swing process. Mplayer Internet play is not working as of this writing, and IPX mode is not currently available (Access states they are waiting for DirectX 5 to implement IPX). Some S3 video cards have incompatibility problems with the game (acknowledged by Access and being addressed). The club chosen for chipping in the off-line tournaments mysteriously changes between rounds, an unpleasant surprise for the inattentive player. Given Access' great track record of customer responsiveness, it's a good bet these bugs will be squashed in relatively short order; still, the game as reviewed had these and a few other anomalies, and if you are one of the people for whom the tri-click is not working or whose video card won't run the game, you would probably argue with those problems being characterized as minor (moral: buy your games from someone with a generous return policy).

Perhaps more significant is what is *not* in *LS 98*. While the changes from one generation of *Links* to the next (e.g., *Links 386* to *Links LS*) have, in the past, been major leaps in technology, *LS 98* doesn't feel significantly different from its predecessor. The change from DOS to Windows 95 makes little cosmetic difference, the graphics enhancements are minor, the Internet play improvements (enabling up to eight players in an on-line game) are an attempt to achieve parity with the competition – ditto the off-line tournament mode. There are no ground breaking innovations; in fact, if you have become accustomed to the revolutionary "True-swing" interface introduced in *FPS:Golf*, you may be reluctant to go back to the old "Tri-click" swinging method (the only interface offered in *LS 98*).

Programs such as the aforementioned *FPS:Golf* provide a strong challenge to the claim of best golf sim. In the end, however, it is a tribute to the overall excellence of *Links LS 98* that, with relatively minor improvements over its predecessor, it is still the standard to which all other golf sims are compared. *–Jeff Lackey*

[clockwise from right]

The new off-line tourney mode allows you to play against a leaderboard of PGA pros

A nice, shady approach shot

The reflecting water provides some spectacular views

★★★☆☆

Links LS 98

Access Software • www.accesssoftware.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 90 MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-8 players, Internet, LAN, modem

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Tony La Russa Baseball 4

One giant leap backward for this venerable series

The yearly release cycle that dominates the sports genre has claimed another victim with *Tony La Russa Baseball 4*. Most new versions of a program add new features and enhance existing ones, but *La Russa 4* feels like a step backward, keeping the same basic feature-set and downgrading the overall presentation of the game. While it remains one of the better managerial simulations, and is the only graphical game with a rotisserie fantasy draft, these features have been implemented in previous versions of the game, which makes this a questionable upgrade.

The same criticism has been leveled at most sports series, but at least EA Sports redoes their graphic engine every year. Sierra has been most guilty of the minor upgrade syndrome, but at least the last version of *Baseball Pro* was offered at a discounted price. For the price of a new game, *La Russa 4* gives you the same 3D stadiums, arcade and manage-only modes, a fast-simulating season replay, a career-based GM Challenge, and fantasy draft from *La Russa 3*, only this time it's native to Windows 95. It's a full-featured game, for sure, and if you ignore the actual on-field action, it's a seriously impressive baseball game. But the arcade mode is so bad it drops the game out of contention.

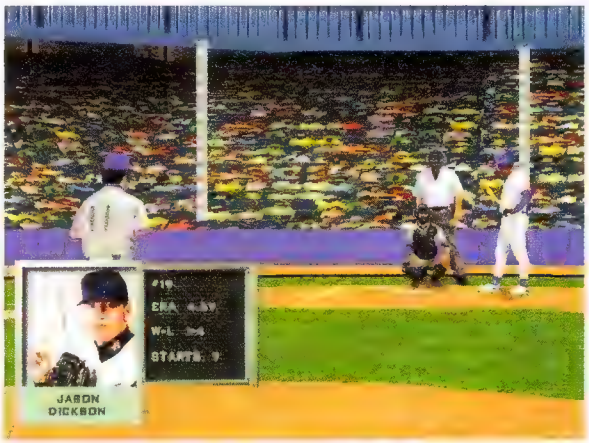
The first two *La Russa*'s were pretty good arcade games; around the time of the third, the high-resolution graphics caused the frame rate to drop enough to negatively impact the playability. That problem is exacerbated in *La Russa 4*, as the overhead of Windows 95 combined with merely average artwork has made for a bad playing and looking game, with poor frame rates, choppy animation, and grossly out-of-proportion players (they're enormous in relation to the field). The sound effects are merely adequate, and the game gives you the ability to turn off three different announcers, rather than the one most other games have.

Most sports games must have a high level of presentation chrome to compete (or so it would appear), and even in this aspect *La Russa 4* flubs it. The menus are all so stylish, with detailed backgrounds and transparent menus, that you often can't read the all-important text. Sorting and presenting your data is considerably better than *Baseball Pro*, but it's not as simple as it should be (why not list the major stats first in the "Leage Leaders" screen?). Printing remains an afterthought, and baseball people, being baseball people, shouldn't have to export their stats into text files in order to properly print rosters with all stats and ratings (gotta have them numbers).

But enough about the presentation – fans are interested in its simulation anyway. It doesn't disappoint. It simulates seasons quickly (though you'll miss *Baseball Pro*'s ability to do it in the background in Windows 95), and does a more than adequate job. Like most games, you'll have an odd blip – pitchers winning too many MVP awards, players hitting 65 homers, good players having bad seasons. After replaying many seasons in GM mode, some more ominous inconsistencies pop up. Some pitchers, for example, will have their endurance rating mysteriously drop from one season to another, even under normal use (a starter used as a reliever all season makes sense, but on more than one occasion, a starter dropped from 8 to 1 after throwing 200+ innings).

Another questionable feature is whether it's fair to penalize a player for one season that was beset with injuries. The *La Russa* system bases results on a complete season's worth of statistics, and if you try to expand a player's role in subsequent seasons, you'll find they get injured more often than normal. This is the flaw of basing a simulation model purely on statistics – a guy who gets 10 hits in 20 at-bats over the course of a season isn't necessarily a .500 hitter over the course of a season, but under the *La Russa* system, it's unlikely he'll ever get much more than 20 at-bats in a season without suffering an injury. An example in the current game would be Seattle's Randy Johnson, who in the *La Russa* game is now a mediocre pitcher with no endurance because he missed most of 1996 with a back injury.

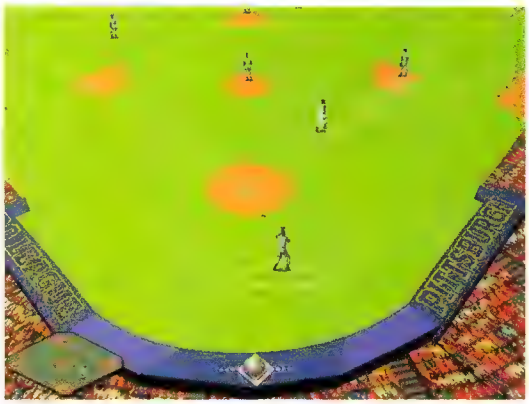
Overall, *Tony La Russa Baseball 4* is a disastrous arcade game with an excellent simulation engine. If you're new to the series, and have a blazing fast machine, you might want to try this version (or maybe check out *La Russa 3: 1996 Edition* in the bargain bin). However, for longtime fans, it adds little and takes away a lot from previous versions of the game. *–Steve Bauman*



[top to bottom]
The batter-pitcher graphics aren't particularly good and are way out of proportion

What about Maddux's sinker?

Based on measuring the height of the catcher, each player is approximately 12 feet tall



★★☆☆☆

Tony La Russa Baseball 4

Maxis • www.maxis.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 90MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2 players, LAN, modem, serial

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Grand Slam

Stranded on third with two outs in the ninth

There were perfectly good reasons to have high expectations *Grand Slam*. It's the first baseball game to support 3D acceleration, sports a radical batter-pitcher interface, and it's the second sports game from Virgin after the critically-acclaimed *NHL PowerPlay*. So why is it so disappointing?

It has a lot to do with the subtle details of both baseball and the better baseball games. It starts with the presentation, which seems oddly cartoon-like, both in the animation and in the menu design, and immediately gives you a negative impression of the overall game. The announcer comes across like an MTV hack, spewing the same smarmy and repetitive comments at the most inappropriate time (indeed, notorious singles hitter Mark McGwire will be "patient and try to sneak his way on").

(clockwise from top)

The hitting interface, with its power meter, doesn't work nearly as well as the pitching interface

Entering the windup. Pitchers will have the most fun with Grand Slam

Bored with playing games? Try the "Tater Tourney"

Despite the game's 3D engine and support for accelerator cards, there are no configurable camera angles (probably to help mask the game's use of 2D sprites for character animation). The camera either stays put and cuts to other pre-determined points (for slower machines), or moves wildly during a play, causing you to temporarily lose your bearings (and unless you have the controls set to "relative," you may never know what base you're really throwing the ball to).

The stadium graphics are excellent (though one wonders why the city looks so up-close-and-personal at Camden Yards), but the player animation isn't smooth and like previous versions of *Tony La Russa* baseball, it lacks enough frames of animation to be convincing. Despite the 3D acceleration, *Grand Slam* lacks most of the fancy effects that a 3D card brings to the table, but in its defense it speeds up the stadium rendering considerably, which is more important than oodles of transparencies, filtering, lens-flares, and all of the other crap people demand from their 3D games.

The player control during the game is decent, but the base-running interface is completely over-designed (causing a lot of overrun bases) – *Triple Play 98* handles this much better. However, the best part of *Grand Slam* is its fantastic pitching interface. After selecting the pitch-type and location, the accuracy and velocity is determined by a multi-click interface similar to those found in golf games. It adds one aspect of real baseball not present in any other game: rhythm. When pitching, you can actually get in a rhythm and throw a lot of strikes (in fact, you can really strike out hitters in this game). The opposite holds true as well – getting out of rhythm causes wildness, which translates into walks and bad pitches. Anyone who's played a golf game can relate to getting completely out of synch and suddenly slicing balls all over the course. The interface's only flaw is that they didn't take it to the next level, which would have been to vary the swing meter to reflect situational tension (it would move faster when facing Frank Thomas with the bases loaded, and slower when facing, say, Mike Bordick).

Less successful is the batting interface, which is cumbersome to use and makes little baseball sense. Basically, it uses a power-meter to determine swing speed, but since there's little skill in taking a hard versus soft swing, why try to model it? However, the game, on the middle skill level, allows you to look for location, which is always a welcome feature.

Once the ball is put in play, it seems to follow planned trajectories, so you'll see the same hits over and over again that, in keeping with the game's arcade angle, reach their destination impossibly fast. Overall, it's a bit better than *Triple Play* in baseball logic, generally throwing balls to the right bases, but it can't handle a pitching staff during the course of a game.

Though *Grand Slam* turns out to be slightly better than its first impression, it's ultimately a weak-to-average baseball game. If it's arcade action you crave, *Triple Play 98* will probably make you happier, with its superior presentation. It also has both the Major League Players and Properties licenses, whereas *Grand Slam* lacks the latter (meaning you get players for bogus teams).

Ultimately, both games have a lot of weaknesses that perhaps illustrate that you can't have a baseball game that combines a great action-game feel with the on-field smarts of a good simulation (both claim to do this, but fall short). It's usually a visual thing – the on-field action rarely resembles things you'd see in a "real" game, and the "feel," whatever that may mean, isn't right. *Grand Slam* is close to getting the pitching right – now it's time to work on the rest of the game. *–Steve Bauman*

★★½☆☆

Grand Slam

Virgin • www.vie.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 90MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2 at the same machine

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HEROES OF THE GRIDIRON

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Game Theater 64

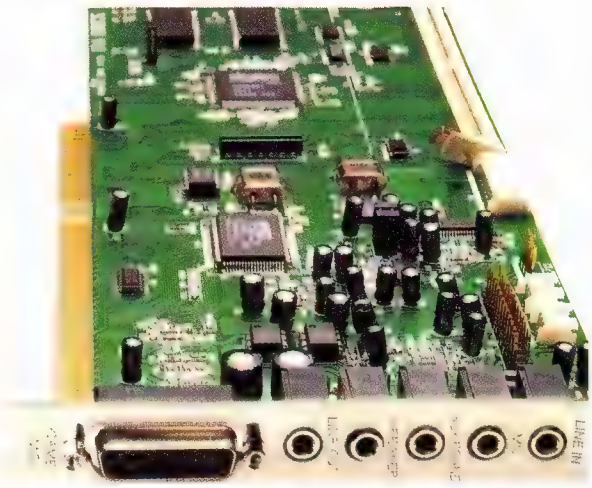
An alternative sound card all the way from France

With Creative Labs holding the lion's share of the market in sound products, it's refreshing to see a quality sound card to compete with the SoundBlaster Awe64 Gold. The Game Theater 64, produced by European multimedia company Guillemot International, is a solid entry into the field of high-end sound cards. Complete with full 64-voice wavetable

synthesis, four speaker capability, upgradable RAM and many software features this card also boasts crystal clear audio and 3D positional sound.

This plug-and-play card fits easily into any open ISA slot on your motherboard. With support for most all of the current standards, such as General Midi, Sound Blaster and DirectSound, few problems popped up with the games tested with the card. However, when configuring DOS games, it would only work if you select SoundBlaster, SoundBlaster Pro or ESS from the configuration programs. For a couple of really old games, DOS drivers had to be obtained from Guillemot.

Unique to the Game Theater 64 is an extra speaker jack for adding a rear set of speakers, giving you a surround-sound effect. Guillemot has included a nifty piece of software, MaxiFX, which gives you the capability of customizing the surround sound features for any game or application. Fortunately they have included 50 premade two and four speaker audio enhancements for some of the top games on the market. A game like *Quake* turns into a downright scary experience when you hear eerie noises from behind.



MaxiSound Game Theater 64

To round out the package, the MaxiSound comes with several music-related pieces of software, *Internet Phone* and a full version of *Pod* from Ubi Soft (who distributes the card in the U.S.). The Game Theater 64 is nice alternative package for someone looking to upgrade or add a new sound card to their system. *-Jim Pedicord*

MaxiSound Game Theater 64 • Guillemot International • www.guillemot.com

X36 Control System

A solid entry in the controller arena

Known for their electronic chess sets, Saitek has entered the controller scene with a fantastic two-piece joystick and throttle unit. Well constructed with firm comfortable grips, this fully programmable unit has détente positions on the throttle, mouse pointer, and enough buttons, switches and hats to cover most functions on any advanced flight-sim.

The joystick itself is a normal four button stick with four and eight-way hat switches and a fully enclosed grip. Two unique features make it stand out from competitors. A launch button with a safety flip switch adds a fun touch and a little finger slider switch on the bottom is great for shift-button features. The throttle has standard rotary switches and buttons but also includes a unique rocker switch on the underside that can be configured for rudder control.

Installation is simple, though an extra serial cable is needed if mouse support on the throttle is used. Programming is a breeze with a Windows-based visual programming system. Simply click the button or switch and assign it a function. Included with the software is a good assortment of pre-programmed sample files for many recent games and simulations.

Saitek X36 Control System

With the stick's smoothness and stability, control is very good. Picking off the legs of mechs in *MechWarrior 2* is a snap, and lining up for bombing runs in an F-22 goes off without a hitch. The throttle has a tension screw for adjustment and the buttons and switches have a sturdy and firm feel to them. The only possible problem with this package is its rather scanty paper documentation and possible awkwardness for someone with large hands.

At a suggested retail price of $150, the X36 is perfect if you are looking for a complete controller package or just wishing to upgrade an older system. It's a solid entry in the controller arena. *-Jim Pedicord*

X36 Control System • Saitek • www.saitek.com

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Developed for Windows® 95

PLAYERS INDY RACING LEAGUE HEROES OF THE GRIDIRON FREE INTERNET GAME PLAYER

Multiplayer fallacy, Part II

This letter may appear specious to you because I work as a Producer/Designer for VR1 Inc. (yes, the *Fighter Ace* folks), but I feel I must respond to your August editorial.

You wonder if anyone is willing to pay $120 per year for online gaming? Well, I must ask how many movies have you seen in a cinema this month? Probably at least one, maybe two. And when you went, did you partake of some refreshment? A Coke? Perhaps a salty, savory treat smothered in yellow goo? I won't belabor the point, you can see where I'm going. A large portion of the core multiplayer audience frequently spends up to and more than $120 a year on "entertainment," and that's without factoring in dinner before or after, drinks, transport, etc. And what do they get for their money? They get to rent a seat for two hours, then they leave. How much value do you think the *Diablo* fans have gotten for the $50 they paid for the CD? A lot more than they received from *Batman & Robin*, I'll wager.

That's it. I just thought I'd give you a perspective you may not have considered.

Martyn Iannece
Producer/Designer
VR1 Inc.

Great editorial in the August issue. Long live single-player games! Online gaming still feels like a feature, not a product.

Scott Steinberg
Crystal Dynamics

Concerning your article " The Multiplayer Fallacy," I must speak up. You have always been a reasonable man of moderate opinion in your articles; however, in this most recent article, you seem to have become an extremist. Maybe it is because you feel you are addressing an extreme problem, but none the less, you are extreme.

I am one of those heavy multiplayer guys. I agree that we may only make up 5-10% of the population now, but like all trends our numbers only tend to grow as technology improves. We are a minority of the players with a majority of the energy to teach and preach, and the game companies realize this. Furthermore, I believe many people buy games because they *want* to experience the multiplayer world, but never get around to learning it. For that matter, many games are bought on the dream of the single player experience, and simply never find the time to delve into the game. Features listed on the box, not necessarily features ever mastered by the player, sell a lot of games.

Let me back up a moment. I am not upset with the article. In fact, I agree to an extent. I do not wish to see AI technology reduced in the name of excess time spent on multiplayer code. However, I also do not wish to see the trend of "multiplayer capability as standard of the industry" disappear. I only ask that you reread the intensity of your article and modify your stance to a more middle of the road position

In conclusion, I wish the industry would share its best multiplayer code as a subroutine (like that in Activision's *MechWarrior*) and install it in lots of games so that the wheel need not be reinvented. This way the creativity can be harnessed back to the offline AI, which, after all, is where the genius of great games originate. (Even multiplayer gamers can use more intelligent AI sidekicks to assist them in combat.)

Always thankful for you and the Computer Games Online.

Glenn H. Kletzky, MD
Via Internet

I would simply like to compliment Steve Bauman on his article "The multiplayer fallacy." As a die-hard gamer who very rarely multiplays, I'm tired of hearing all these companies rant and rave about gaming on the Internet. I'm really sick of trying to find a game that was designed for one person. How many people own eight computers with IPX networks to play other people? I urge every gamer to start hitting game companies to start making better games for one person.

James Laurino
Via Internet

I agree with your editorial in the August issue – game mags really are one reason everybody is adding networking to their games. A game simply won't get five stars (to take a certain rating system as an example) if it doesn't have network play.

I'm not a net gamer, but I don't think that networked games are bad. Actually, I'd like to see some networked RPGs. Why don't you start complaining about the lack of a networking option in RPGs, as you do for any 3D shooter which doesn't support it? RPGs have *always* supported parties of several characters. Only these were controlled using various levels of AI - from the nonexistent to the annoying. Why not let real people play those characters? It shouldn't be too difficult to do.

What I'd like to see is for RPGs to support both AI and real players, with the ability to switch to AI, or have one player control a few characters, if there aren't enough human players for the party.

When we have that, maybe at last we'll have a real networked game – not a deathmatch or a virtual world (such as *Ultima Online*), but something with a real plot. It will be the closest thing to real role-playing. Maybe then I'll be tempted to spend my time gaming online.

Eyal Teler
Via Internet

My views on the editorial…

I agreed with your basic point, though I disagreed with some of your arguments. I do find the persistent squealing by marketing folks about their respective companies' Internet Strategies™ both annoying and depressing (two words: *Catfight Online*). However, I disagree with your reasons for it.

Your two basic arguments are that net-gaming is not all that it's hyped up to be due to cost and a basic lack of popularity. I don't honestly think that in ten years either of these points will be a problem. Most online services, in my opinion, will be free, supported by true FMV advertising (i.e. like a TV); and the Internet will become so ubiquitous and so easy to use that there will be more than enough people to sustain online gaming.

However, I think some aspects of gaming just don't go with online play. For example: the art of level design in an action game. In the best-paced action games (think *Tomb Raider*), the designers will have tuned the level just right, so enemies will burst forth at the exact moment that your heart will flutter most. The pacing on The Lost World level of *Tomb Raider*, for example, was great – the appearance of Raptors slowly building tension until the arrival of that mighty T-Rex. That kind of pacing just doesn't exist in multiplayer games – bad guys randomly just pop up hither and thither. That's why I could never really get into *Quake* Internet play – the repetitive atmosphere, accompanied by often excruciating lag, sent me back to single-player PC's and TC's.

I do, however, think that net play holds massive potential. Imagine an online flight-sim in which you are in the midst of a dynamic campaign, in the midst of a war that feels quite realistic, and in which everyone else is too. Imagine what it could do for sports games: imagine a true simulation of the NHL, for example, where you are a player on a team with human teammates, a human coach, a human GM, and a human commissioner, in which real friends are being traded to other teams by real enemies. Multiplayer does, indeed hold massive promise – at this point, though, it's in its early stages. But it will never entirely supplant single-player, and designers have to realize that.

Adam G. Unikowsky
Via Internet

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Letters may be edited for space considerations

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